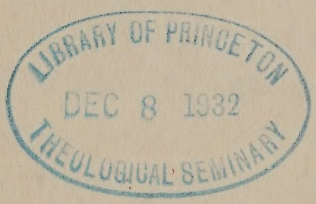
ROMANCES *from the* OLD TESTAMENT

Dallas Lore Sharp



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ROMANCES
from the
OLD TESTAMENT

Dallas Lore Sharp

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SHARP
ROMANCES FROM THE OLD TESTAMENT

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I

The Slave-Wife

A CLUSTER of black tents on the edge of a valley; green slopes that reach up to hills, whose steeper sides climb into ragged, blasted ridges that toss a wild sea of rock and wood, rolling higher and wider till it breaks and dies away in the east on the wide dead sands of Arabia! The black tents were the tents of Abraham, the new village of Beersheba, which he had planted in the almost unbroken wilderness of Paran.

It was early morning, a summer morning, spicy with unrolling leaves and fresh with the smell of young grass. The sky was cloudless, an overreaching vast of distant blue, cut at the rim with peak, plateau, and gorge. Peace and quiet spread with the dawn; the wilderness and solitary place seemed glad for the coming of the tents; but there never had been gladness and peace in the wilderness, and only more strife came with the coming of man.

Abraham was slowly tearing into shreds a

leaf that he had picked from the tamarisk sapling growing near the door of his tent. He had brought the sacred tree from Mamre, and planted it here as a sign that, at least, his tent-stakes had been driven to stay, and also as a kind of pledge to the soil. He was tearing one of the tender leaves of the young tree, and his eyes were turned far away up the valley.

Yonder up the valley his sheep were feeding; but his gaze was not fixed upon the flocks that lay white, here and there, like sleeping clouds against the green. The old man was not seeing; he was pondering. His kindly face, white-framed in hair and beard, was grave, perplexed, and sad. It was too gentle, too subtle a face to be hard; and the cloud across it now was not of storm, only a passing mist of sorrow.

He did not hear the light footsteps behind him. It was a woman, a young, dark-skinned, beautifully molded slave, who had just left the tent bearing a water-jar upon her shoulder. A slave, and more! She was Hagar, a wife of Abraham and the mother of his first-born. Her face was Egyptian, and every feature, every line of it was as perfect as the pure curve of her bare dark arms. But there was a furtive, fearful look haunting her eyes.

She slipped away and down the slope to the spring, stopping a moment to speak to a boy, dark like herself, lying amid the deep, soft grass, feathering arrows. She filled the jar and came slowly back toward the tent, followed by Ishmael, the boy. As they passed behind the man the flaps of the great tent were pushed aside and another woman, the free wife of Abraham, appeared in the door.

She was unveiled, and the gray hair lay white across her forehead; but still the strong face was beautiful, the bearing like that of a queen. She did not speak or move, but stood in the tent door gazing steadily at Abraham, her lips set, her whole face fixed and glittering with insufferable hatred. The man felt the chill of her look and turned, but moved no farther.

The eyes of the two women did not meet; they understood each other. The slave instinctively drew back toward the man. But one swift glance into his face—and her water-jar seemed suddenly to grow heavy; she swayed beneath its weight as if about to fall, made a step toward Abraham and sank to her knees at his feet.

The morning light ran gold across the shadows and kindled in the dew; an eagle,

wheeling high above the valley, sent its defiant cry shivering down through the quiet air; the muffled thunder of a lion shook the heart of the hills. The boy at Hagar's side listened, and fingered the arrow's notch upon the string. A sheep bleated; a shepherd's voice fell strange upon the morning—then silence again, the wide, savage silence of the wilderness, and the eagle's wheel and scream.

Hagar knew that Abraham had spent the night alone in the hills, that he had prayed; for if she was his slave, she was his child's mother, and he could not send his own son to the desert death without a struggle. He had prayed to Yahweh. She too had prayed that night, a long bitter prayer to Anu, her Heaven-god, and to Tafnut, the tender Mother of Life —but Yahweh alone had heard. She read his awful answer in the heavy face of Abraham.

The man seemed tenderer than his God, for he could not speak the word. A long time he had hesitated, and tried to appease the hate of Sarah. She was determined that the slave should go—out of her sight, anywhere: to the camps of the Philistines if she would; or to the desert, and its swifter, sweeter death—and the time had come.

The jar slipped from the hands of the slave to the ground. Abraham stooped, and lifting the bottle placed it upon her shoulder, and thrusting a bundle of bread into her free hand, turned away and pointed silently down the valley through which they had entered the wilderness. Then he passed quickly through the tent door—and Hagar with her child was alone.

The eagle had wound far up among the clouds. Below him lay the wilderness like a map; its trails, its lairs, its living springs, its wastes of death all traced and marked; its highest, sheerest peak a mere point. Not so to Hagar. The narrow valley rose like the walls of the grave about her. She could not see; she was not even sure of the rough winding pass that led out to the cities of men. The wilderness all around—and no star to guide! for there was no village, no tent, not even a cave toward which her feet might press.

As in a dream she passed down once more by the spring, then out into the valley, and, with the lad, turned toward the east along the sheep-trail. Soon the twisting valley bent and the sheer walls shut out the village and the black tent of Abraham.

The grass was fresh and cool as they started out. It had been weeks, however, since the rains ceased, so that the stream, threading the wady with them, was little more than a broken line of shrinking pools. Soon the heavy dew, that had fallen with the last twilight, began to steam from the heating rocks, rolling thick and cloudy over the valley. Already the sun had burned a thousand holes through the cloud, licking up the white wraiths, and beating into the gorge, until, as some living thing, the craggy flanks seemed to quiver and faint.

Hagar and the boy kept on, though the stones were beginning to burn their feet. The trail too was growing rougher and less plain. The familiar pastures were far behind. It had been hours since the last flock of sheep was seen. Was this the way—the trail that led back to Hebron? It was all new, strange, and wild. They had gone beyond the trail; they had taken a wrong valley; they were lost.

Deeper into the wilds they stumbled, on and on, until the very heavens were turned, until the sun began to set where, in the morning, it had risen. A while before the evening they wandered out of the wady into a wide level plain that was covered with stunted bushes.

It was the edge of the desert. And here the swift, black night overtook them.

Crawling up to a shelf that projected from a huge bowlder, where they could beat off the wolves, they waited and Ishmael slept. All through the star-lit hours of that night Hagar watched, crouching close against the rock like some wounded, frightened beast. The bark of the jackals startled her; the long-drawn howl of the hyenas drove sleep away; and once, twice, a long lithe shadow stealing in among the bushes close below made her reach to waken Ishmael; but the lad was murmuring in his sleep for water, and she drew back; for the water-skin was shrinking. The stars grew hateful. They seemed to glare at her out of the heaven-darkness as the green eyes of the leopard burned upon her from the earth-darkness among the bushes of the plain.

Yet when the gray dawn drove away the shadows and the fearful eyes, and the sun began to burn again, the desert seemed still more the place of death.

That day they struggled on across the plain, whither they knew not. They only knew that the hot, dust-filled wind which set steadily from the south brought no breath of water; and with

their backs to this, they kept away toward the blue haze in the north that told of hills and fountains.

But how far away hung the low, cool bank! And how the white sands glared and scorched! The very shadows of the scattered rocks smoked with the desert heat. Long before night their water was gone, and the dust, like the devilfish of the sea, sucked with its million mouths at every pore of their skin.

Near midnight Ishmael awoke and begged for water. His cheeks were hot, his temples throbbed, and Hagar, drawing him upon her breast in mother anguish, caught the fever's taint upon his breath.

The cry that broke from her swollen lips made a jackal, lurking behind a mound of sand, leap back with a snarl of fright. She held the boy close in her arms and rocked him, while the eyes of heaven watched; and she moaned to drown his moaning in her ears.

When again the fierce light came, she saw a fiercer, wilder light burn in his eyes. The madness! She dragged him to the thin shade of a bush. She dug her hands deep down into the sand to find moist earth to hold upon his mouth. She would have let her own heart's

blood to wet his lips, had it burned cooler than his own.

A thousand times she heard the sound of running water, a thousand times she started up. But she knew these sounds were the beatings of the fevered blood within her brain. It was the madness coming. She would not listen—not yet.

Hark! She raised her head. The ripple of a stream! Had she been sleeping? Where was she? Look! Yonder—the black tent of Abraham! and, snatching the child in her arms, she staggered toward that black tent of her brain, which moved away and away, till she reeled and fell.

The boy groaned; and at that sound the mother shook the madness off once more. She looked upon her child. He was dying. She could not see him die! A long shadow of the westering sun crept across the sand and touched the young face like a finger of death. Hagar started at the touch and drew away. The madness was coming back.

She could not see; she did not know that this, in whose shadow she now sat, was a great rock. She could see only the form of her child yonder.

She closed her eyes. Then came trooping back the former days, when she had fled from Sarah, when the angel of Yahweh had found her by the fountain in the way to Shur and promised a nation to her babe. And at the thought she tore her hair and rocked until her face was in the sand, she rocked crying out against the God that promised life, but gave the desert death.

And when the cry was spent a voice spoke from the evening sky—or was it the sound of falling water? or was it the madness calling her again? She felt her way along the rock. The sound was nearer, sweeter. A cool breath brought the smell of flowers. She raised herself and there, in a tiny mirror at her feet, gleamed a star.

She did not stop to drink. But when the dawn spread pearl and rose across the waste, the boy was sleeping in her arms, the madness gone, the fever dying on his breath.

II

Finding the Maid

ABRAHAM had come a stranger among the Canaanites, a sojourner from Mesopotamia, seeking a country, as other men have done, that was far away and wide and full of promise—a land where the altars of his fathers had never been raised, nor their smoldering fires kindled, nor their unheeding gods worshiped.

He had found the land he sought; and richer, fairer far than his dreams were its valley pastures, its tree-covered hills, its plains where the sea winds slept. Richer too the wealth that the land had given him. His sheep and goats were counted by flocks; his camels outnumbered those of all the herds of Mamre together. He was a prince among the strangers; and his God was all his own. His hundred and threescore years had left him rich and great and good.

They had left him old also and gray and stricken. The sacred oaks of Mamre, under

whose wide arms he had made the grave of his wife, even they, ancient and hoary as they were, seemed lusty as Abraham moved beneath them, or sat, just without, at his tent door and dreamed.

Already he had given over the cares of his household to the keeping of Eliezer, his trusty servant. But there was yet one great matter to settle. It touched Isaac, his son, the heir of all his wealth, in whom alone the promise of the future should be fulfilled.

The matter had long troubled Abraham. Much of late, especially since the death of Sarah, he had thought, and often asked himself, where he should find a wife for his son.

Not from the Canaanites about him. They did not know the God who had called him across the desert; indeed, there were no people that did. These of the strange country, however, were not heathen only; they were of different blood as well. Must he, for this maiden, retrace his steps to the homeland? But even his own people did not understand the voice he had followed. Their gods were idols too. Yet stronger grew the conviction with him that only beyond the desert in Ur of the Chaldees, among his kindred, could a fitting wife be had.

It was settled. And yet he was troubled. How could the maiden be obtained? He dare not go, for he had vowed never to return. Nor dare he send Isaac, lest the lad be taken with the easy, idolatrous life from which it had cost him so much to break away. A nation had been promised the seed of Abraham; in him all the families of the earth should be blessed —if, turning his back upon the past, the dying life, the false religion of his people, he sought a city without foundation, whose maker and builder was God.

Neither he nor his son could return: the maiden must be brought.

Calling Eliezer, the chief servant, to his tent one day, the Patriarch said,

"Put your hand under my thigh, I pray, and swear by the Lord, the God of heaven and the God of earth, that you will not take a wife unto my son of the daughters of the Canaanites; but that you will go into my country and to my kindred and take a wife for my son."

Eliezer knew the dangers of such a journey, the difficulties attending such a quest, and was not quick to swear.

"Suppose the woman will not be willing to follow me into this land? Must I bring thy

son again into the land from which thou didst come?"

Abraham started. Fixing his eyes upon the old servant, his hand toward heaven, his face pale with emotion, he answered:

"Beware that you take not my son thither. The Lord God which took me from my father's house and from the land of my kindred, and sware saying, 'Unto thy seed will I give this land,' he shall send his angel before you and you shall take a wife for my son from thence. If the woman will not follow you, then you shall be free from my oath; only take not my son thither again."

It was a long and perilous journey from the Jordan to the Euphrates in that distant time. Then, as now, it was made by camel train, and a thousand dangers beset the way. But this was a matter of vast moment: no less a business than the choosing of a wife, the starting of a new line, the founding of a new nation—and great hazards must be risked. There were wives to be had in plenty, with much less trouble, near at hand. There always are; but not the kind that are fit for mothers.

So Eliezer, taking ten camels and men enough for a guard, set out toward the land

between the rivers. The beasts were laden with rare gifts of cloth and jewels; for, though he went begging a maiden, he must not go a beggar. He need not buy the wife for his master, but it was well to be generous with the rings and robes; it made the begging so very pleasant.

Northward and eastward moved the caravan through the long, hot days when the desert burned, and through the nights when the stars came out and the chill winds made the travelers shiver. Onward they moved, stopping for rest during the hottest hours, creeping on and on along the smoking, sandy trail toward Haran, the city of Nahor, in Mesopotamia.

There were no cattle, no heavy loads of baggage to hinder, and the camels swung swiftly across the plain. Five days out, and rough, undulating hills were sighted. Soon the trail led into a shallow valley, the dry bed, or wady, of a narrow river; then climbing out where the pools began, it wound away toward a low stretch of green, above which gleamed a temple turret and the roofs of houses. They were coming to a city.

It was still a long way off. The sun was rolling along the rim of the desert when the

caravan halted by the walls. Years had passed since Eliezer last saw the walls of this place; but there had been little change. He knew he had reached Haran, where Nahor, the brother of his master, Abraham, had lived. He had passed the desert; he had arrived at Haran; he could easily find the people of his master; and yet it seemed that the most difficult part of his mission had just begun. How should he know, how should he obtain the maiden destined for the wife of Isaac?

The evening had fallen; the sweet winds from the river, catching the fragrance of the gardens of the city on their way, came out to welcome the travelers. The smell of water at the edge of the desert was like a breath from flower-covered hills to seamen making port. It made the camels impatient; they would have broken into a gallop for the well, had not Eliezer brought them to their knees. Not yet. He must think. For, lo! yonder through the gates the maidens of the city were coming with their pitchers to draw water for the evening.

There was not one damsel, alone, but many. And at the thought of the many, came a feeling of utter helplessness in choosing, which caused the devout old servant to bow his head and

pray. It was a childlike prayer for guidance, that he might, by a single sign, find out the maiden. He would go among them and ask for a drink of water; and he prayed that the one who not only gave to him, but who should also draw for his camels—that she might be the one he sought.

It was a singularly simple yet vital test. What beauty of character would not be indicated by such a spirit? A maiden who would give a stranger drink, who would also see that his camels were thirsty and draw for them, could lack none of the graces that make a woman womanly. She must be noble, tender, quick of mind and heart.

The old man approached the laughing, chatting group about the well. Several had filled their jars and were resting upon the curb; others, standing with their vessels upon their heads, waiting a turn, were watching the strange people of the caravan.

As Eliezer came up, a damsel, with her pitcher full, left the bevy about the well, and advanced toward him on her way to the city. She had not cared to linger with the others and stare at the man; but, slipping away, was taking the path homeward alone. Her eyes fell as

she drew near Eliezer, and she would have passed him without lifting her head, had he not spoken. At his first word she paused, and, with a frankness and courtesy that spoke of gentle breeding, looked up. It was a face of wonderful sweetness and beauty, full of light and strength and purity.

Eliezer was too old, too bent upon the welfare of his master to fall in love; but there was a leap and flash to his blood as he beheld the fresh, young loveliness of the face and form before him. The throb reached his heart as prayer—that this might be she.

Bowing low with a reverence that told her the same story of gentleness that her look had spoken to him, he asked her for a drink from her pitcher.

"Drink, my lord," she replied, lowered the jar from her shoulder upon her hand, holding it with her own strength to his lips, and, when he finished, adding, "I will draw water for thy camels also, until they have done drinking," hastening back to the well as she spoke, where she emptied her pitcher into the stone trough and began to draw for the thirsty beasts.

The old servant looked on with wonder, astonished at this sudden and complete an-

swer to his prayer. But was it an answer? Was this the maiden destined for his young master? He waited and watched, all the time hoping, fearing more and more as the rare beauty of the girl grew upon him.

By the time the camels were satisfied the two were left alone at the well. No further word had been spoken. Coming nearer, the stranger took a splendid nose ring from a bag about his waist, a pair of curiously wrought bracelets, a handful of gold coins and poured them into her lap, asking,

"Whose daughter art thou, I pray thee? Is there room in thy father's house for us to lodge?"

A tinge of warmer color spread across her cheek; a half-startled, questioning, incredulous delight shone in her eyes. But recovering herself instantly, she replied:

"I am the daughter of Bethuel the son of Milcah, which she bore to Nahor. And," she added, "we have both provender enough and room to lodge in."

It was Eliezer's turn to start with wonder and delight. The granddaughter of Nahor! He could scarcely believe. Nahor was the brother of Abraham. And he bent his head—

"Blessed be the Lord God of my master. He hath led me to the house of my master's brethren," he murmured.

And Rebekah, hearing this, forgot her pitcher, and ran away for home to tell her people.

When they saw the presents and heard the girl's story there was great excitement. Laban, her brother, hurried out to meet and welcome the man from his father's uncle across the desert. The camels were ungirded and given straw; water was brought to the men and their feet washed, while Rebekah and her mother set food upon the table for supper.

But Eliezer would not eat until he had told the reason for his coming. They listened. He related the story of Abraham since his departure from Haran so long ago; told them of the Lord's promise, of the old man's wish for his son, of the journey across the desert, and, at great length, with awe in his voice, of his prayer by the well and the way Rebekah seemed sent in answer, saying at the end,

"And now if ye will deal kindly and truly with my master, tell me, and if not, tell me, that I may turn to the right hand or the left."

It was enough; they required no more.

Father and son replied, "The thing proceedeth from the Lord; we cannot speak unto thee bad or good. Behold, Rebekah is before thee; take her and go and let her be the wife of Isaac, as the Lord hath spoken."

The old servant bowed himself to the earth in his humility and joy, worshiping and praising God.

He had forgotten his hunger. Leaving the food still untasted he opened the packs that the camels had brought and gave the jewels of silver and gold, the coin and rich raiment to Rebekah and to all in the house.

Days of joy and pastime were to follow, but ever prompt, Eliezer appeared the next morning with a request to be sent away to his master. He was afraid of delays.

They tried to dissuade him. "Let the damsel abide with us a few days," the mother begged. "Let her remain at least ten. After that she shall go."

"Hinder me not," was his solemn reply, "seeing the Lord hath prospered my way."

He could not listen to their customs, their excuses, nor their feelings. They pleaded in vain, and finally they said,

"We will call the damsel and let her decide."

When Rebekah came, her mother, drawing her tenderly to her, asked,

"Will you go away with this man?"

The eyes of the maiden dropped. Then suddenly she threw her arms about her mother's neck and sobbed, "I will go."

That very day, mounted upon the camels, with her nurse and slave girls, Rebekah set out from Haran for her new home in the strange land far away beyond the desert. The whole household accompanied her to the gate of the city to bless her.

She said farewell at the wall and, remounting, began to move away.

"Thou art our sister," they called after her; "be thou the mother of thousands of millions, and let thy seed possess the gate of those which hate them."

Soon the camels broke into their long, swaying trot, heading westward down the wady toward the desert. Rebekah looked back. Her mother and the others she could see against the gray wall. Then only the wall in a long low line stood out on the horizon, and the temple turret above in the sky. By noon the bank of green that marked the river land was lost to sight, and the desert, wide and terrible

as the sea, burned to the rim of the burning vault above them.

The evening came, morning dawned, evening and morning came and went again and again, and still the wonderful beasts, their heads straight out in the fiery wind, their clumsy cushioned feet treading the scorching sands, swift, rolling, buoyant, masterful, held on and on.

The snowy head of Hermon loomed far away on the right; after a time the green began to blur the glare of the sand; yonder a rock; a scar appeared which soon ran into a wady; tents and flocks were passed; a great river was crossed; and when again the twilight fell, the caravan was swinging rapidly along a ridge of woody fragrant hills in the south country beyond Jordan.

As the dusk settled over Mamre that night Isaac went alone to his mother's grave beneath the oaks, then wandered out in the lonely twilight, across the pastures, to meditate. It was not time for the return of the caravan; yet he was thinking, wondering where the camels might be, whether headed homeward, and whether they bore him a beautiful bride. Afar in the desert he pictured the train coming on

like the winds; but he could not dream out the face of the maiden that was coming.

The dusk deepened. He had all but crossed the pastures to the road, when, looking up, behold, the camels were coming! They had just rounded a hill that shut the road off in the north, ten of them, and by their gait he recognized them as his own. Just then they stopped, and he saw a woman dismount.

At the moment the caravan turned the shoulder of the hill, where Isaac discovered it, Rebekah, who was riding close to Eliezer, also made a discovery. Through the soft evening light she saw the figure of a man in the fields, and by instinct divined who he might be.

"Who is it?" she asked the old servant.

"My master," was the answer.

She halted her camel. The caravan stopped. Making the animal kneel, she descended, and, taking a heavy veil, she had covered her face before Isaac came up to them.

Here the strange, sweet story ends, except that Eliezer told Isaac of the whole adventure, and that "Isaac brought Rebekah into his mother Sarah's tent, and took her, and she became his wife; and he loved her; and Isaac was comforted after his mother's death."

III

The Dreamer

PERHAPS there was reason for my brothers' hatred of me. My mother was not theirs; I was younger than they and, it is true, more favored of my father; I was not of their mind, either, and had often complained of them, so that much of their punishment was laid up against me. For these reasons they hated me; but they hated me most of all for my dreams.

How could a lad, with only sheep to tend, help dreaming in those Ephraim hills? Nowhere does the sun lie brighter, or the sea winds blow fresher than there. And when the spring is young, when the doves mourn in the olives, when the scarlet lilies glow among the green, and the storks go flying northward—what else to do but dream? How the sea winds used to call me! Once from the crown of Gerizim I saw the sails of Tarshish ships bound outward on the Great Sea; and often with my flock, straying aside from my brothers, I have stood on some high ridge and watched

a camel-caravan rise and fall over the hills until the line was lost in the distance, passing south toward Egypt. Then I would dream again—dream until the hills grew into palaces and the nibbling sheep became my humble people.

Once, twice, I told these dreams to my brothers. They mocked me. When off in the pastures by themselves I knew they spoke hardly of me, that they had set their faces against me; but how hard I did not know.

The old feud between our family and the Hittites was healed for the time, and we were pasturing farther up the Kanah. I had been at home several days, my flock being cared for by my brothers, when my father, fearing that they might wander too far among the treacherous tribes in the hills, sent me to turn them back.

It was an April morning, soft with purple steam, and warm, for the new spring sun had melted to the bottom of every valley and ravine. Olives and figs along the road to Shechem were in bloom, the sweet breath of wild grapes streamed across in places and where the wild grapes failed I pinched the fresh-leaved thyme among the rocks to keep the sweet spring breathing. Sparrows sang from every

hedge and bush; a long line of noisy ravens flew over, making toward the Jordan; and all through the calling air was the voice of running rivulets—the Hebrews' voice of dreams.

At the pastures back of Shechem, where I expected my brothers, I did not find them. A stranger told me they had gone to Dothan, a few miles farther on in the hills. The way thither was wild and rugged. Clumps of black tents showed here and there on the slopes, and from the higher passes I could see in the valleys the herdsmen and their flocks of sheep like snowdrifts still unmelted. Yonder in the distance were my brothers, drifting slowly along the great caravan road which ran between Egypt and the North. I signaled; but they did not see me.

They were all together as I came up, a dark look on every face. None of them loved me; yet they were my father's sons. I did not think of murder. I gave them greeting, and for reply one turned and struck me to the ground. For a moment I lay stunned, then half hearing I heard them say: "No, do not kill him. Throw him into yonder pit and let him dream his dreams in there."

I begged for mercy. I fought and prayed;

but they were ten. Stripping off my coat, they dragged me to the pit and cast me in.

The death of those next hours! Since then I have breathed the dungeon's poisoned breath; I have matched myself against a plotting woman; have looked a Pharaoh in the eye without a quiver; but even yet the horror of that open grave lies cold and damp upon me.

In ooze waist-deep I fell. The cistern's concave walls contracted to a narrow neck above me, impossible for any but a ghost to scale. The leprous slime was thick; it stirred and soon began to crawl over me. Underneath my feet was something round and slippery like a skull. Was I not the first to die within this hole? I beat against the walls, and screamed for pity. The brothers heard; but, dividing the bread which I had brought them, they moved beyond my cries.

I ceased to beat and began to wonder if I could die standing, or would my strength fail and let me smother in this slime? and would my father ever know and find my bones? Thus the hours slipped by. The sun watched awhile at my grave's door, then went away and left a piece of vacant sky to shut me in. A hyena pushed his grizzled head into the opening and

stared down at me. Then the shadows came; and while I watched to see if there should come one star to prick my bit of blue I heard approaching voices and saw above me my brother Judah's face. Their hearts had turned! I should not die! A rope was lowered, and from the festering ooze, the death-damp and the dark I was drawn to life again.

Falling upon my knees, I would have kissed their feet, when strong hands pinned my arms, a chain snapped about my wrists, and I was dragged to my feet, a prisoner to a band of Midianites—a slave! for into Judah's hand I saw one of the band count out my price in silver.

Was it so! I looked upon them with their blood-money, and as the band led me away I called Jehovah to witness.

"You have sold me for a slave," I said to Judah. "You shall all one day come upon your knees to me, begging your freedom."

The camels were headed toward the south, bearing spices for the embalmers in Egypt. I was the only slave. Day was breaking when the caravan set forward, and the beasts, lightly laden, soon bore me beyond the farthest pastures that I knew. Now all the land was

strange. I thought of home and of my weeping father; and if I wept, it was no more than many a stronger man has done. I was a mere boy, a slave, with chain and lash and slave's death waiting me—only Jehovah knew where. I was a boy (what mercy!); and I had the courage of my ignorance. Then, too, a camel's back had been my cradle; and as the caravan left the Judæan hills and swung out into the boundless desert, hope stirred within me and though a slave, I dreamed again.

We crossed the borders of Egypt and all too early were at the gates of Ha-onar. I had never seen so great a city. Such temples, tombs, and such a palace as the king's! And these were but glimpses as the camels wound along the streets to the market place! But I was sick at heart, sick waiting with wrists and ankles chained, for a purchaser. At last, among the spice buyers appeared a man of great size wearing the uniform of a royal officer. My owners knew him, for I heard them murmur, "Potiphar, captain of the guard." He bought largely of the spices, then looked me over and went away. Two slaves soon appeared and led me after him; and I found myself a household slave to Potiphar, captain of the king's guard.

It was no time, no place, to sulk. A slave even might rise; so night and day I set myself to please my master. And I did please him. Care after care was left to me, until, within a year, his private business, inside the house and out, was in my keeping.

As overseer in the house I often came into the presence of my master's wife. It was my joy to serve her, for she was beautiful and gracious beyond any woman I had ever seen. She was pleased with my delight, and more and more found tasks for me which brought me to her. She began to talk with me; she heard the story of my shepherd life; my brothers' unnatural deed; she heard my hopes and even promised me her help. I saw her daily now, and would have died to do her slightest wish.

One day she called me to her couch to speak again of certain plans by which, with her assistance, I hoped to get my freedom and a chance in the king's service. Then soon we talked of other things. I told her some of my strange early dreams, and as she listened her slender fingers touched my hair.

I had never felt a woman's touch before, and started at the sweet, wild current that outsped my very blood. Her fingers knew, and reach-

ing out, half playfully, with both her lovely arms she drew me toward her until I breathed her breath.

For one swift instant I forgot I was a slave; then terror struck me numb. She felt the fire flash through me, she saw me blanch; and, not unpleased, bade me begone.

Then burned a fever in my veins. I was her slave, and what I never thought to be—a slave unto myself. I trembled at the madness of my heart. Scarcely I dared see her, hear her, even think of her, for fear a voice would whisper, "She also thinks."

The next day and the next I was away. When I came before her finally I did not look to read her face lest she should read the weakness and the passion in my own. So I played the slave, with eyes upon the ground. She was half-vexed, I think, and when I moved to go, commanded me to come on the morrow and show her the lotus-pool that had only lately been finished. I dared not disobey; but I knew, if once more I was alone with her—with her and my own mad heart—that I was lost, unless Jehovah help me.

The house was empty and still. Through the drawn tapestry I saw her waiting for me,

and in my weakness stopped and drank her beauty till my thirsty soul was drunk. I passed into the room, all slave, and kneeled. It angered her. She wanted me to be a man; and quivering till her robe's hem shook, she hissed, "Slave! Coward! Fool!"

The words stung. They were too true. Anger, pride, and shame unbound me. I rose to my feet, that moment free, her master and my own. Her strength was gone. She swayed as if about to swoon, then, reaching out her hands toward me, with all of Heaven's beauty in her eyes, she would have fallen in my arms, had I not stepped aside. Her foot tripped, but catching at my cloak, which slipped from my shoulders in her grasp, she saved herself the fall.

I leaped behind the arras, or her dagger would have hit my heart, for she sprang at me like a tiger—wounded, furious. The servants came at her screams. They feared to lift a hand; but they stood against me when the baffled woman accused me to my master. I had no word of defense. A slave was not allowed to speak. My service spoke for me, however, and despite the telltale cloak, my master did not believe me guilty—else he would have hanged me instead of sending me to prison.

An alien, a slave, and now a prisoner! A slave's death remained to complete my shame and suffering. Nay, death could set me free, and in my misery I prayed for death.

But the first shock of revulsion and despair passed quickly away. I had my youth and vigor yet; and though the arras of my master's house were changed for walls hanging dank and green with years of death, though my companions were worse than beasts, and though I knew that soul and body both must rot in this foul hole, yet I was safer, freer here than in all the freedom of Potiphar's house, where my very flesh had trembled at the rustle of a woman's robes. Strange it may seem, yet it is true, that even an Egyptian prison offers some chance. Truth and work count everywhere. So here again I forced myself to serve, not alone for favor with my keepers, but to hold down the brute within me, that came out in my companions as their hair grew long, their shoulders stooped, their eyes dull and sullen. It was not long before the dungeon keys were given to me, then soon the keys to every door, except the outer one, where paced the king's guard.

Among the new prisoners, one day, were

the cupbearer and the chief baker from the palace. They had been accused of plotting to poison the king. Like all others in the dungeon, they quickly yielded to the gloom and chill, and fell into despair. Then came the morning when they would not eat. Both had had dreams. They were not gifted with interpretation, and they thought these dreams boded ill.

I had befriended them and from them had learned much concerning the court and the king. They trusted me, and when I asked to hear their dreams they told me all.

Was I inspired? I know not; but I saw, as in the noon's white light, the meanings of these dreams—saw the cupbearer with the purple wine once more before the king, and the baker hanging from a gallows with the vultures tearing at his flesh. They heard my interpretation, and the cupbearer, falling on my neck, promised to remember me to Pharaoh.

Three days went by. It was the king's birthday. The cupbearer and the baker were released—the baker to the gallows just outside the prison walls, and the cupbearer—to his former service at the king's table, I hoped, but I did not know; for the days passed, weeks,

months, and still I waited and still the prison shut me in.

Thus two years wore away. The dungeon death was eating at my life, when one morning my former master, Potiphar, the captain, appeared with orders to bring me before Pharaoh. I was shaved, washed and dressed—the prison slough cast from me like the dead skin of a snake—and led out to the palace.

Pharaoh had dreamed! And there was no magician nor astrologer in the realm who could tell him the interpretation. At last the cupbearer had remembered me.

Jehovah was with me, else the glory and the dread of Pharaoh had struck me dumb. But I looked into the royal eyes until they took from me the confidence that I felt behind my own.

"I have heard say of thee that thou canst understand a dream to interpret it."

"It is not in me," I replied, "God shall give Pharaoh an answer of peace."

"I dreamed I stood along the river, and lo! there came up out of the river seven kine, fat-fleshed and well-favored; then seven other kine came up after them, lean-fleshed and ill-favored, uglier than any in all Egypt; and the lean kine ate up the fat kine; but they were

as lean and ugly as before. Then I dreamed that seven ears came out on one stalk, fat and good; then seven ears withered, and thin and blasted by the east wind; and the thin ears swallowed up the good ears."

He ceased and leaned forward, the sooner to get the meaning from my lips.

All Egypt knows, and many lands beside, if Jehovah gave me the true interpretation. The dream was good. The king's heart was moved, and he exclaimed: "Let praise be given to your God, whose spirit is within you."

My prison life was over—my slavery too. A room in the palace was given to me, and that night I slept beneath the king's roof, and dreamed again the strange dream of my boyhood, the dream in which I saw my sheaf stand up while my brothers' sheaves bowed before it. Then the scene changed; I was inside that slimy pit once more, with the hyena glaring with his hungry, watery eyes at me; then I was out, counting the money which my owners paid to Judah, and saying, "You yet shall come upon your knees to me for freedom." The sound of my voice repeating those words woke me.

The next day I was in council with the

king. He desired to heed the dream, but how? Had I a way? A man should be appointed, I said, to build storehouses throughout the realm, and to gather into them for the next seven years the abundant harvests, against the years of famine. It was approved, and Pharaoh, drawing his royal signet from his finger, placed it upon mine, and unclasping the gold chain about his neck, put it around mine, saying:

"God hath showed thee this. See, with this ring and this chain I set thee over my house; and by thy word shall all my land be ruled. Only on the throne shall I be greater than thou."

The seven years of plenty came and went. All this time I had not heard from Canaan whether my father lived or not. I would have gone to him, but standing next the king, my days were full of labor. I went to every corner of the land, building, gathering, storing; and when the famine years came Egypt was safe. Not so were other lands. The dearth fell far and wide, so that early in the second year the caravans from distant countries began to arrive for grain. They came from Canaan first, for she was nearest.

More and more the buyers poured in, as

word of Egypt's plenty spread. One day as I was attending to the loading of a caravan, ten men with asses appeared and begged for corn. They were from Canaan, Hebrews I knew from their dress, but not until I bade them rise did I recognize them—my brothers. A cry of joy was on my lips; I had almost flung myself upon them—when I remembered.

They did not know me, not even when I spoke, for my voice was rough with the pain of my choked love. I had forgiven them a thousand times; yet now I held myself severely and through an interpreter asked them who they were and whence they came. They told me; but I set my face and called them spies.

"No, no, my lord! We are not spies!" they cried. "We are one man's sons, true men. And there is yet another brother, the youngest, at home with his father."

"One man's sons! You ten! Now I know that you are spies. By the life of Pharaoh, you shall not depart, till this youngest brother come here and prove you innocent." For at the thought of that youngest brother, my brother Benjamin, a new fear took hold upon me—that they might have cast him also into some pit.

I had them sent to the prison for three days—

in the cells where I had passed almost three years. When they were brought before me again. I pointed to Simeon, and the guards bound him; the brothers looking on.

"Go," I said, "and take the corn to your families. I shall keep this one in chains, and if you are not spies, bring hither the youngest brother and none of you shall die."

And I heard Reuben murmur to the others. "I told you not to do that sin against Joseph our brother. His blood is now upon us."

They had been gone several months. Their corn must soon be used up; but they would delay returning, I knew, for beside my father's reluctance to part with Benjamin, they, doubtless, had discovered the money which I had secretly replaced in their sacks, and on this account they feared to show themselves again.

I had begun to expect them any day now, when an officer brought me word that the ten Hebrews had returned. Benjamin was with them. I had a feast prepared in my own house and sent the steward to fetch the strangers. They were afraid of the show and fell upon the ground before me, trembling and undone. I tried to reassure them by asking after their journey and of the old man, their father;

then, going close to Benjamin—my mother's son—I looked into his open face and said,

"Is this your younger brother of whom you spoke?" But my lips could hold my heart no longer, and I hastened from the room to hide my tears.

The table was spread, and, master of myself, I returned and seated them in the manner of my father at home, beginning with Reuben, the first-born, at the head, on in order of age, down to Benjamin. They looked at each other in amazement and terror. What was this that I should do as their father did? That I should know the order of their years? But they ate, and though I must not speak, I yet could heap up Benjamin's plate, and I did —five times higher than any other plate and five times higher than he could eat.

Their fears at last were put at rest, and laden with more corn they started back to Canaan. But they had not paid dearly enough for my slavery; nor had I yet shown them all of my forgiveness. My heart was breaking with the secret of its love. I must make myself known or die. So I put my silver cup with the corn into Benjamin's sack, and when they were well beyond the city walls, I sent officers in haste to

search them, commanding, if they found a cup in any sack to bring the whole band back to me in chains.

They soon came back, their garments rent and woe and horror deep in every face. May Jehovah forgive me if I did them wrong. From the earth at my feet Judah spoke:

"My lord! my lord! What shall we say! How shall we clear ourselves? God hath found us out. We are thy salves; and Benjamin also with whom the cup is found."

"Not so," I answered. "Only he in whose sack the cup was found. As for you, get you up in peace to your father."

At this Judah sprang to his feet. He had my father's face then. He took a step nearer me, with such a look of tenderness, sorrow and strength in his eyes that must have touched Jehovah's heart, as it touched mine, and canceled all his sin.

"My lord, hear me one word," he prayed. "Thou didst ask us if we had a father, and a brother. We said, we have a father, an old man, and a brother, a child of his old age, a little one, and his brother is dead, and he is left alone of his mother, and his father loveth him. We told thee he could not leave or his

father would die. But thou didst command. Our father wept and cried: 'I had two sons. The one went from me and is torn in pieces; and if ye take this one from me and mischief befall him, ye shall bring down my gray hairs in sorrow to the grave.'

"Now, when I come to my father and he seeth the lad is not with me, he will die. I became surety to my father for the lad. Now, I pray, let me abide instead of the lad, thy bondservant forever. For how shall I go to my father without the lad and see his evil!"

It was enough; I could bear no more, and bidding every servant depart, with tears streaming down my cheeks, I cried:

"Reuben, Asher, Judah, Benjamin—brothers! do you not know me? I am Joseph, your brother, whom you sold into Egypt. No! No! Do not fall, nor grieve, nor be angry with yourselves. It was not you, but God that sent me on ahead to preserve you."

And I took them in my arms.

IV

The Scarlet Thread

THE wandering winds, the midnight stars, and the swirling, driving storms guarded the grave of Moses in the lonely valley. Beside them only the angels kept watch and ward; for no human eyes had seen when he laid him down to sleep in the fierce, wild solitudes of the mountains of Moab.

One thing, however, the eyes of the children of Israel did see, and that was Joshua, the son of Nun, at their head in the place of Moses. Another sight stirred them too—a wilderness of forty years of tangled trails behind them, and before them a river, beyond which, in the foothills, gleamed the white walls of Jericho, the first stronghold of their promised land.

Those walls must be razed, that city taken. But who knew the approach through the hills, the gates and the strength of the garrison? Joshua was bold, but he was cautious; he would not advance against an unknown foe;

so, pitching his tents at Shittim, he sent out two spies, and waited there in camp until they should return.

It is with the fortunes of these two spies, and a house in Jericho, across the window of which a scarlet thread was stretched, that this ancient story deals.

River and hill and city were all one in the darkness that lay across the land as the two men, swimming the Jordan a little way above the guarded ford and making a detour through a swamp, struck the road behind the sentries, and started toward Jericho.

As they went along they marked the width of the road, its length, and the point where it branched to the south. Near the city, on the east, they found a clear, level spot where the army might camp. They ran together round the walls to measure them and to find the gates. And, finally, with a clear, accurate map of the approach and surroundings in mind, they set themselves to find an entrance to the city, for as yet their mission was barely begun.

Every gate was barred, of course; it was long past the setting of the watch. But the city was not asleep. Indeed, the two spies had had

to dodge and creep and hide all along the road; for parties of soldiers were coming and going continually. Noise of moving feet, of heavy wheels and a murmur as of voices, broke over the walls. At the gates, bands of armed men were leaving and entering, and the spies, slipping unobserved among a company of these, went through into the streets.

They were scarcely within, however, when the torch of one of the band was lifted directly over them. The light flickered, then flared in the wind and fell upon the strange faces that no dress could conceal. But the man with the torch had no time to cry out. With a lightning blow he was sent sprawling upon the stones, and the spies, in the momentary confusion, disappeared into the deep shadow along a row of houses.

They were safely away before the soldier got his wits enough together to explain. The alarm was sounded. News was carried hurriedly to the king that spies from the Israelitish camp had entered the city; and the search was begun. Soon the streets were glaring with flaming torches and echoing with shouts and tramp of feet.

Meantime the two men, with eyes and ears

wide open, had followed the news-bearer to the palace, and from there had hastened after the courier to the garrison, seeing at every turn the thousand things for which their captain waited. Still what counted it all if they were taken?

They stopped in the shadow of the garrison. How in this maze of strange streets were they to elude their pursuers? How, with every gate barred, every foot of wall watched, were they to make their escape?

The soldiers were running toward the walls, out into the darker, denser portions of the city, posting guards at the corners, sending bands down the alleys and into the gardens and courts.

Not that way then; but back toward the palace; back boldly into the open, where there was the least chance to hide, and, at the same time, least expectation of their hiding.

A little group of citizens were hurrying along in the direction of the palace, asking excitedly what it all meant. The spies fell in with these and passing under torch after torch without arousing suspicion, were nearing the court that fronted the palace when a woman

stepped out of a dark doorway and joined them.

A stream of light from an open window fell aslant her uncovered face and neck, and gleamed across the jeweled bracelets around her beautiful bare arms. A moment only and the light was gone, but the company had seen her, beautiful, luring, evil; and the men of Jericho gave room and went by; but the spies, by a common impulse, stopped as she spoke.

The plan had flashed upon them as a single thought. It was a desperate risk; but it was a hope, and if it failed—they could be in no sorer straits. She must save them. They knew the woman would discover them. The creature was at home in the dark; she knew every man in Jericho. She had been the first to hear of their entrance and, surely enough, despite the darkness, she recognized them instantly, and—she also recognized the glitter in the palm of one of them, as the glitter of gold. There was just a step of hesitation, a moment of doubt and dread, when the second spy reached quickly and opened a handful of gold to pour into her own hands or upon the street. It fell with a glint and muffled chink into both of hers.

"And still there's more," he whispered. "Only be quick, get us out of here, anywhere, anywhere. Save us and we'll give our lives for yours."

She understood. It was for gold and for more than gold she was playing now. The confusion and terror in Jericho since the appearance of the Israelitish host at Shittim was ominous. Disquieting rumors of the victories of this new people had been coming in for a long time. They were driving all before them; they were on the march for the Jordan and the land of the Canaanites. It was plain, even to the woman, that this city would fall, fall from very fear of the sound of the enemy's trumpets. Her life was only one among the thousands; but it was more than all the thousands to her, and she saw this as her chance against the day of doom.

As her hands closed about the money she sent a peal of laughter ringing down the street. One of the company who had just passed, turned and saw her following with two men. When he turned again, a moment later, the three were gone. They had slipped into a narrow lane, and, led by the woman, were speeding as swiftly and silently as shadows

across the city. This was her hour, her haunt, and these her paths.

She had already guided them half way from the palace to the walls without once bringing them out upon the open streets, and was hurrying along a garden when a dozen soldiers turned the wall just ahead of them. There was no time, no chance to flee; for not only was the way blocked ahead, but there was a hurrying of feet upon the street behind.

With a word to the spies to follow close in the dark of the wall, she ran forward, as if to meet the soldiers, but, slipping her hand through the bars of a gate, that had often opened to her before, she stood a moment by the post until the two men had come up behind her and passed through, then followed herself, just as a torch of one of the band revealed her.

They had seen only a woman. She had smiled and disappeared. But the gate was barred; and they pushed on in search of the spies.

It was more than an hour later when the woman knocked softly at a low door in the extreme south of the city. Light footsteps came down the stair; the bolt slipped quickly

in the door and a little maid, with a flickering earthen lamp, bade them enter. They were safe. Not a soldier in all Jericho would think of looking for spies here! And they sat down to rest and eat.

But the little group of citizens who passed the woman near the palace had gone on to the garrison for news. The companies that had been sent out were coming back. There had been no sight yet of the spies. One of the soldiers was describing their appearance. The speaker was the man who had first discovered them and got the stinging blow in the face. The citizens were listening. Suddenly it struck one of them that the two men who had turned away with the woman answered this description. And, after all, who were they? He did not know. And when did she join them? They were the spies, he was sure. The soldier repeated his account at the listener's request. They were the two.

No time was lost in crossing the city. The soldiers knew the way and the house.

The spies had already passed in before the company from the garrison set out; but they had not yet refreshed themselves when the

sound of rapid running woke the street followed by voices and a loud rapping on the door. Caught! Trapped! One look told them that it was not a plot by the woman. Her face was pale, her eyes burning, her lips set. The men were at her mercy. But she had not led the guards of the king a chase across the city to be caught like a fox in a den.

There was a narrow door at the rear of the room. She hurried them through this, and up a narrower stair of huge, rough stones, to the roof. It was covered deep with stalks of hemp drying here in the sun and softening in the dew. They saw her plan. It took only an instant to cover them, and she was back, hastening with a face of smiles to open the door to the street.

She was calm, radiant, too lovely to be disbelieved, and her greeting to the leader at the threshold (he had knocked here before) caused him to forget, for a moment, why he had come.

"Bring forth the men," he said, looking hard into the deep, dark eyes of the woman, "the two whom you met near the palace. They are spies from the camp of the Israelites."

"Were they spies?" she cried with alarm upon her face. "Those two strangers? Yes, they

were here and supped with me; but that was about an hour ago. When the gate was opened for the soldiers to pass out, they departed with them. Which way they took I know not. Yet, from what I heard, it was toward the Jordan. If you hurry you can overtake them, I am sure. And," she half whispered to the leader, "when you return, stop and taste my wine."

It was too frankly, innocently, naturally told to be doubted. The gate was near, for the house of the harlot was against the great wall, and the soldiers hurried through, dividing their band in order to cover both roads to the river.

She stood at the door until she heard the creak of the heavy hinges and the thud of bolts as the gate was shut, then bolting her own door, she went immediately to the roof. She had won again; but the troop would be back.

"They are gone," she said, and the two men crept from the piles of hemp. The woman carried a long, heavy cord in her hand. "See?" she continued, leading them to what seemed the coping of the roof. And they did see. Lo! they were not only upon the roof but upon the top of the wall of the city. Below them lay the

deep, dark valley; yonder in the starlight loomed a mountain, and the woman, pointing down the valley to a dozen flaming lights, said, "There go your pursuers who were hammering just now at the door." They were moving toward the river.

One of the men reached to take the rope, but she drew it back.

"Listen!" she began. "This rope will carry from this window in the wall to the ground. I can save you; but I will not until you swear. I know that your Lord has given you this land. Your terror is fallen upon us; for we have heard how your Lord dried up the waters of the Red Sea, and what you did to the kings of the Amorites, Sihon and Og, on the other side of Jordan. Our hearts melted; for it is your God, and he is God in heaven above and in earth beneath. Therefore swear by this Lord, since I have showed kindness to you, that you will show kindness to me and," she added, a flush of shame overspreading her face, "to my father's house. Give me a true token that you will deliver our lives from death."

There was little time for parley or consultation, and they answered: "Our lives for yours. We swear. If the Lord gives us the land, we

will deal kindly and truly with you. This shall be the token: Bind a scarlet thread across this window from which you let us down. Bring all your father's house within. If anyone go out into the streets, his blood be upon his own head; but whosoever shall be with you in the house, his blood be upon our head if any hand touch him."

The oath was made. It was enough. As she lowered them to the ground without the wall, she said, "Get to the mountain and hide three days until the pursuers return."

It was good advice. Every road and thicket near the river was watched. For three days the hunt was kept up, then the men were recalled and the search given over.

When the spies finally reached Shittim and rehearsed their tale to Joshua, he exclaimed, "Truly the Lord has delivered the land into our hands; for the people faint because of us."

It was on the seventh and last of the strange, terrible days of the siege of Jericho, that two young men, riding about the walls, pointed out to Joshua a window, high up, across which a scarlet line was bound. He saw, and coming back, gave command that the accursed city be burned to the ground, that every man,

woman and child be slain, adding, in a voice that was heard by the assembled army:

"Only Rahab, the harlot, in whose window is a scarlet thread, let her, her father, mother and all her household be brought unharmed to me."

And when the walls fell, and the flames shot up over the doomed city, two young men, the two spies, ran quickly to a low door of a house against the wall, where a scarlet thread showed in the window. A pale but beautiful woman met them, and with others from the house, passed out of the open gate, out from the terror and death to the camp of the strangers at Gilgal.

V

The Cost of Victory

THOSE were cruel days, those cold, gray days far back in the dawn, when the light men had was darkness, when they believed in God, but did not know him. Gray, cold, cruel days for the daughters of men! The wonder is that daughters were born to men; that they were fair, pure, and tender like their sisters now.

How, amid the savagery of the hills of Tob, could so beautiful a girl have come to womanhood, as the daughter of Jephthah? The child of an outlaw, accustomed from early girlhood to the shifting home of a robber's tent, to the talk of plunder, to the presence of men worse, because weaker, than her father, she had grown and had come to flower as the bloodroot comes to flower.

Yet the wilderness of Tob was not without the songs of the chaffinch and linnet, not without the breath of the balsam and the nodding heads of the anemones. The tent of Jephthah

was not a home of disorder and brutality. Free and wild as the life of the girl had been, it had not lacked protection and love. Jephthah was leader of the robbers; a strong, bold captain, obeyed by his band and feared far beyond the wilderness borders. She was his only daughter, his only child, the only thing the hating outlaw had to love. Throughout these years she had been a spring welling up in the desert of his exile. For her sake he had made himself master of these mountains, had broken across the borders to leave his name a terror, his boldness and leadership the common talk of Ammon, of Gilead, and Manasseh; and at last, when his tribe was in trouble, when Ammon threatened and no Gileadite leader could be found, and the elders who exiled him sent into Tob for him, it was for her sake that he listened, that he returned to head the people as captain and judge of the tribes.

The robber chief, the exile, had been brought back to judge the land west of the frontiers of Ammon to the Jordan, and from the Salt Sea to Dan. He was virtually a king; and his daughter shared his honor. It was not a change of life for either of them, so much as a widening of it—more of the same kind; but

less savage and solitary and no longer in a stranger's land.

The new fortune had fallen opportunely for the daughter of Jephthah—just at the passing of girlhood. Hitherto the silent wilderness, the unpeopled hills, the restless, perilous life had been enough. The wondering, the dreaming, the longing—the sweet twilight that falls on the evening of girlhood was coming, but only its first pain-touch of mystery had been felt by her. She was in Gilead, in the new, the large, the wonderful life when the dreaming came, when she woke, a longing, loving, waiting woman.

She could only wait, only long. There was yet no time, no chance to love; for there was war. The king of Ammon was advancing along the valleys of Moab and had already taken possession of Aroer, near the Jordan. All over Gilead and Manasseh, even before Jephthah's return from Tob, there had been great preparation of arms and men; now the work was pushed with rigor day and night.

Jephthah watched the soldiers drill, the companies form and depart at his command, entirely confident of success, yet, for some unknown reason, overcast with a nameless dread and gloom. It was not he who was spoiling

for the fight. He was defending, not invading, and while he had no fear of the ill-organized hosts of Ammon, he first sought, as a wise judge and a great leader, to settle the dispute peaceably.

Letters passed between him and the king of Ammon. He asked why the king sought a quarrel, replying to the latter's demand for the land lying between the Arnon and the Tabbok, in words of great restraint and unanswerable argument. But the invader would not listen, and Jephthah, having perfected his plans while waiting the outcome of the letters, left the camp at Mizpeh to join his forces at Ramoth-Gilead on their march toward the borders.

His heart was heavy as he kissed his beautiful daughter farewell. They were used to this parting, it had been a daily occurrence in the wilderness days. This time, however, the warrior bent and took her in his arms; and her head where it lay that moment on his breast, left a sweet numb pain that he could not forget.

It was a sign. By the time he reached Ramoth-Gilead he knew that the cloud over him, that his depression, was a portent of evil. Of his death? He knew not, nor cared; and dismissed the thought. But might it be of de-

feat? Hardly, hardly of defeat, he thought, as his splendid army passed out of Ramoth in review before him.

Yet the forces of Ammon were unknown. Every chance, every advantage lay with the foe, he knew, except the advantage of his own courage, his soldiers' confidence, and the help of his God.

Might it be that his God was withdrawing? The spirit of the Lord had once been upon him; surely now it was not so.

The army marched on, the two forces were approaching, the day of battle was near. When at last the black tents of Ammon were sighted thick as fir trees on a slope near Aroer, and when his own tents were pitched on the opposite slope of the valley, Jephthah, taking his officers, went aside among the rocks.

It was not to reconnoiter. The plan of the battle had already been determined; the enemy was scattered for half a mile along the valley with the line weak at every point. While making a demonstration at each end the Israelitish forces were really to be concentrated at the center to break the line and fight the divisions, the body of the troops rushing through like a wedge to drive the enemy into the valley.

Jephthah had seen the chance at once. It could not fail; yet, he led his staff back along the slope to a rock commanding the whole valley, and in the hush of the evening, in the presence of the officers, uncovered his head, bowed himself, and made a solemn vow to the Lord, the God of Israel: "If thou shalt without fail deliver the children of Ammon into my hands, then it shall be that whatsoever cometh forth of the doors of my house to meet me, when I return in peace from the children of Ammon, shall surely be the Lord's, and I shall offer it up for a burnt offering."

When he slept that night it was with the peace of the watching stars. The foreboding, the fear was gone. The spirit of the Lord had again come upon him. The stars in their courses, as they fought against Sisera, would fight against the king of Ammon. Confidence and eagerness fell like the dew upon the waiting camp.

God had heard the vow; and surely he would require the sacrifice, for he fought with Jephthah that day. The rout of Ammon was complete, the slaughter fearful. The march of Jephthah back, along the line of fighting, was a march of triumph. The wild stretches between

the towns were gay with welcoming crowds; and from over Gilead and Manasseh the people began to pour into Mizpeh to receive their judge and deliverer.

Jephthah had not sought his position; he had not fought for glory; he was not flattered by praise; he was still the rough border chieftain. Yet the sun never shone for him brighter than upon this homeward march. Not a cloud flecked the sky. The gloom in which he left Mizpeh had changed to light on his return; the fear, the pain of his farewell had become the keenest joy as he neared his home and the welcome of his daughter.

A procession had formed at Mizpeh to go out and meet him. The women with timbrels were to salute him first, then turn and accompany him with dancing and song. And Jephthah on his return from the great victory at Gibeon was met by the women of Gilgal singing,

"Sun stand still upon Gibeon,
And thou, moon, in the valley of Ashlon.
And the sun stood still and the moon
stayed
Until the nation had avenged themselves
of their enemies."

So they came singing this and other war songs from the book of Judges, greeting their new deliverer.

He saw her from afar. Her white robe floating in the morning breeze and shining in the morning light, her forehead wreathed, and wreaths of green in her hand she came; the sweetest, purest, freshest triumph of all. The judge, the leader, the conqueror was but a father, and the father for one moment forgot the people, the army, the victory and the vow as he opened his arms to receive her. She had not touched him. Just short of his extended arms he stopped stiff, dumb. The face above her had whitened; the lips that had opened to speak, moved, but were silent, the eyes stared wild with terror.

"Father, father!" "My daughter, O my daughter," groaned the man, catching the fainting girl to his breast.

"My child, my child," they heard him cry as they drew back with silent timbrels, leaving father and daughter alone.

The officers knew and soon the people knew. The streets of Mizpeh were darkened. Men moved about in sackcloth, with ashes upon their heads.

"Father," and her eyes opened, "father," she murmured, laying her fair hands upon his bronzed ones, and staying them from rending his clothes, "what have I done? What is it? What have you done? All is well. It is well. Tell me."

"My child, my child, you have brought me very low," he groaned, rocking in his despair.

"Tell me, father." And holding her that he might not see her face, he continued:

"I have opened my mouth to the Lord. I have vowed and I cannot go back. My child! O my child!"

For a moment she could not think, could not understand. She heard, she knew—a burnt sacrifice to the Lord—but the offering? She? Herself?

It was only for a moment. Then she understood. If she faltered that moment, it was not from fear, not from lack of love. It was not faltering. Her soul had gone; she could not call it back from the future. In that instant of terrible truth all the soul lived—lived for Jephthah all the life of the past; lived for the young, beautiful girl the far-away beautiful future, the unlived life, the life she had dreamed. A thousand years are but as yester-

day to the spirit; life is only a moment long to the soul, and a moment is sometimes lifelong. In a flash Jephthah's daughter saw it so.

Her arms were about his neck. There was only tenderness in her voice.

"Father, you have opened your mouth unto the Lord. Do unto me according to the vow. The Lord has taken vengeance for you upon your enemies. You must keep your vow; his sacrifice must be burnt," and leaning upon his arm, she said, "Come, let us go home."

A month and yet another month and still the streets of Mizpeh were hushed; the doors of the house of Jephthah were shut; no one entered or left. On a rocky hill overlooking the streets of the town rose an altar to Yahweh, the God of Israel. It could be seen from the house of Jephthah. Morning and evening the smoke of sacrifice had ascended toward the skies while the people below prayed. But since the return of Jephthah no priest had ascended the hill, no smoke had gone up from the altar. Morning and evening the people prayed and waited for a priest, for a sacrifice.

At last the priest and the sacrifice were ready. Two months had passed since Jephthah and his daughter came alone into Mizpeh

on the day of the return from Ammon. She had made a prayer that day. She had asked that before he performed the vow he would send her with her band of maidens back to the mountains of Tob—her free, wild girlhood home—where she might fast and pray and weep aloud in the friendly hills. He had sent her away. Now the days were gone, and she had come home.

One other prayer she now made: that they climb the hill alone—father and daughter, priest and sacrifice; and that it be the evening hour. She could not die in the morning. Let the light be fading, the shadows falling, the day dying, when he laid her upon the altar, when he gave her back to God.

The hour had come. The soft gloom of evening was spreading over mountain and valley, was falling gently over Mizpeh. It was the hour of prayer. As silent as the shadows, the people had gathered at the foot of the High Place for worship. They waited. Lofty and dark against the gray of the sky loomed the altar, piled high with the fagots, ready for the burning coal. Slowly up the winding path climbed a man and a maiden. He was helping her. Slowly and more slowly they ascended. And as they

climbed the shadows deepened. It was almost night.

For a time the forms were lost to the watchers below; then on the edge of the height they reappeared, the maiden in the arms of the man. Now the man and the altar stood alone; dim blurs against the unlighted night.

Was it the glint of a star? the rim of the moon above the hill? No—the flash of fire! And lurid on the night leaped a tongue of flame—the altar flame—that writhed athwart the heaven and seared the heart of God.

VI

The Revenge of the Nazarite

THERE were giants at that time, and earlier, in the dimmer dawn, there were gods upon the earth. It is noon of the day now: then it was the gray breaking, when the mists hung low across the world and wrapped all life with largeness and mystery. Men were mightier then; but women are still as fair.

In the half-light of that morning looms the figure of Samson, son of Manoah, of the tribe of Dan—a shaggy, gristly Israelite, a man-mammoth, the avenger of a people, the plaything of a woman.

Forty years the tribe of Dan had been subject to Philistia, years without peace, for the Philistines were hard masters. During the last twenty of these years Samson had judged Dan, but only at the sufferance of the worrying, insulting overlords toward whom he harbored a smoldering hate that waited only an opportunity to flash forth.

Samson was on the watch for the chance, he

even sought it toward the last; for a strange spirit, a mighty physical power had been growing within him, until a lion was helpless in his hands, until he felt a longing in his muscles to meet singlehanded the whole of Philistia.

Finally he made an occasion. While on a journey to the south he took the liberty of falling deeply in love with a woman of Timnah, a daughter of his enemies, going so far as to demand her of them for his wife. His own people feared the outcome and tried to dissuade him, tried to make him see his duty to take a wife only from out Israel.

Samson refused every appeal, and hastened to celebrate his marriage with this daughter of Timnah, as used young men to do, in a feasting and splendor that amounted to an alliance between Israel and Philistia.

During the progress of the feast, Samson propounded his famous riddle, "Out of the eater came forth meat, out of the strong came forth sweetness," wagering against the correct answer, at the end of the seven days of feasting, a sheet and a change of garment for each of his thirty guests; they failing, should give him the thirty sheets and the thirty changes.

After three days of vain guessing the thirty

Philistines had reached such desperation to save the wager that they resorted to the craft of seeking the bride to coax the answer out of Samson and tell them. They added the threat to burn her and her father's house in case she failed.

Seven days of teasing and weeping and challenging Samson's love of her yielded the answer, which, though she promised to tell no one, she promptly reported to her husband's wily guests, who thereby won the wager, and with it Samson's vengeful wrath.

Aware beyond doubt of his wife's betrayal, he left her, went down to the neighbor Philistine city of Ashkelon, slew thirty men of them, took their spoil and gave change of garments torn from the bodies of his victims unto them which had expounded the riddle.

Thus having appeased the violence of his wrath, Samson was of a mind to forgive his treacherous bride; and so, gift-in-hand, sought her in her father's house.

Meanwhile her father, thinking Samson had deserted his bride, had given her to Samson's best man, the one he had looked upon as his closest friend.

The father refused Samson entrance to his

house as husband of this daughter, but offered her younger sister as a substitute bride.

Samson spurned the offer and made of his personal injury a national cause. All Philistia was his enemy. To prove it, he conceived the device of taking three hundred foxes, tying them tail-to-tail in pairs, with fire brands between, lighting the brands and loosing the foxes in the standing corn fields of the Philistines, so destroying the harvests and standing crops alike, as well as the vineyards and olives.

After satiating his wrath by smiting hip and thigh with a great slaughter, he retired to the stronghold on the top of rock Etam, in the mountains of Judah, where he held himself safely in siege against the Philistines' regular force. They could not dislodge him, and to even matters, spread themselves like a cloud of locusts over Judah, stripping the land bare.

Judah and Philistia were not formally at war. Samson was the trouble, but not until Judah delivered him into their hands would they withdraw. Samson had no desire that these innocent kinsmen should suffer and, after assurance that they would not harm him, he gave himself up and was handed over to his foes, encamped at Lahi. But he broke his ropes,

slew a thousand of them single-handed and escaped.

The race was begun again. They followed him to Gaza, and one night, when he was known to be in the city, the gates were locked and companies set on guard. He was trapped. When he appeared in the morning they should fall upon him. At midnight, by some chance, he arose and went to the wall. The gates were barred and guarded. He could not open them. Then he laughed, and seizing the brass doors, he tore them loose, posts and all, and carried them out into the foothills of Hebron.

He was not to be taken by force. Mighty in bone and sinew, mighty like a brute, with something of the brute's blind trust of muscle, he still had the mind of a child. He was cunning, but he could not reason. He could be caught: the only question was how to hold him.

They found out directly. After his tearing away the gates of Gaza he met Delilah, a woman of the valley of Shorek, a beautiful, daring, scheming creature, who lived by her charms and her wits. Samson was mad with love for her. And she? She had heard of him, and was very friendly—and let the Philistines know about it, who listened to her bargain.

Samson thought he felt a new thrill in her voice that night, he thought he saw a new and softer radiance in her starry eyes. So he did; for the lords of the Philistines had each offered her eleven hundred pieces of silver for the secret of his strength.

It pleased Samson to talk of his prowess; it pleased him more to arouse wonder at it. Delilah was full of wonder, of simple, childish, wondering wonder. How lovely, how sweetly unconscious her astonishment! What a divine toy!

"My love," she murmured, that night, "why are you so strong, so unlike other men? The gift of your God? How? Could I bind you, if you let me, with anything beside my arms, that you could not break?"

He caught her to him. "Beside your arms? I'm bound, forever bound with just this smile that I cannot kiss away," and he drew her close, and laughed through the shaggy hair that fell about his face, for this was love indeed.

Then he laughed again. He would let her see. To have her bind him with her own soft hands! To be her captive, and then to make her gaze wide-eyed! It was better than war, than love! And he said:

"If you bind me with seven green withes that were never dried, I shall be as weak as other men."

She laughed then, kissed him, and sent him away. When he came on the morrow she met him like a happy child and showed him the long green thongs.

He stretched himself at her feet while she wrapped the stout osiers about his ankles and wrists. He even showed her how to make them fast. Three times three the tough bands were turned till he lay, helpless—trapped upon her floor.

She drew off toward an inner curtain. Her fingers were upon the latch.

"Samson," she called, a sudden fear ringing in her words, "the Philistines are upon you!"

There was a muffled sound of feet through the wall. The alarm in the woman's voice, for an instant, alarmed him. The withes snapped as he sprang up. All was quiet. Delilah held the door, a softer, sweeter smile than ever on her lips. She was not afraid of him unbound.

But she was surprised; she was hurt; and she would have fled through the door for grief and shame at his deceit.

"You have mocked me, lied to me. And you

love me? Shame! shame! Leave me," and while she pouted with her pretty lips and put his arms away, he told her to take new ropes that had never been used and bind him.

"I shall then be like common men," he promised her.

The liers-in-wait were again secreted in the inner room. Samson was bound with the new ropes from neck to toe, the woman's hope and fear hardening every knot beyond the chance of slip. Again she guarded the door lest the Philistines rush in to find a free instead of a captive giant and the silver pieces be lost. It was well. The ropes dropped as if charred. Samson loved the sport. The unfeigned fear, the chagrin, the hate that flashed across the beautiful, changeful face, was all wonder and worship to him. He would astonish her still more and give her a new thrill.

She believed him this time; for she was to weave the seven locks of his head with the web on her loom. He would be a babe in her hands. This surely was the secret. Deftly she wove, for the long curling hair was the silver woof of a robe in which she already walked in splendor. Warp and woof were one. He had fallen asleep while she weaved, and to make

doubly sure she took a wooden pin and fastened the web to the heavy beam.

Suddenly the cry of "Philistines" startled him. The pin flew from its socket, the beam spun with a rattle, and Samson stood in the middle of the chamber scarcely awake, but free.

It was not worship in her face now. Even he saw that. The flash of her eyes, the pallor of her cheeks, the tension of her lips was fury. Then it vanished like an April cloud, and the warm, happy light was there again.

She had been his plaything, an innocent, a mere child, a fool. The secret? She would have it; if not by wiles, then by importunity. She could not deceive him; but he loved her, and she could worry him, harass him into telling her.

From that day she grew unhappy and stubborn. He love her, and keep a secret from her? Not until there was nothing hidden from her would she be glad.

Day after day she begged, teased, tormented him, and yet, each day, grew lovelier and more withholding, till, at the last, she knew. Undone with love and weariness he told her. She crept into his arms to listen. He had a vow. He was a Nazarite unto the Lord from his

mother's womb. No razor had ever come upon his head. And here lay the secret: his strength was in his hair. "If I be shaven," he told her, "my strength will go from me and I shall be as weak as other men."

This was the truth. She was not being deceived now; and as she pushed her slender fingers through the dark heavy locks and smiled, he thought her gentle childish heart was happy. It was—joyful at the thought of how those locks should fall into her lap.

All was made ready. The lords of the Philistines were brought into the house, a barber was hidden in the chamber, and a feast made for Samson. He ate and drank, and stretching himself out at her feet, laid his hairy head in her lap and slept.

Then the arras swung aside, one came softly forward, and cut off the seven locks; the door to the inner room opened and armed Philistines crowded about the sleeper.

"Samson," hissed a voice in his ear, "Samson, the Philistines are upon you!"

He heard, tried to rise but fell, staggered to his feet, shook himself and reeled. What was it? But before he knew, they fell upon him, bound him hand and foot; and while Delilah

looked on and laughed, they thrust a redhot iron into his eyes.

There was great rejoicing over Philistia that day. A throng gathered on the highroad to conduct the captive to Gaza where he was to be kept until the time of the festival to Dagon, their god who had delivered him into their hands. He should make sport for them at the feast. Such sport!

Fetters of brass were riveted about his wrists, a heavy chain that left him free to walk was fixed to his ankles, and he was hooked to the pole to grind, driven round and round the narrow circle of the hopper under the torment of the lash.

Blind, bound, and scourged, the prisoner ground at the mill, ground away the dark dreadful hours of the endless night that had fallen upon him. He ate and slept and knew only that he rose each time to the grinding with fresh strength.

The days wore on, the feast to Dagon drew near. After every sleep he woke with new life. He had not reasoned why, till, stumbling over his chain one day, he felt his hair fall forward about his face. His hair had grown long again! His former strength was coming back!

A frenzy seized him, a fierce desire to be free! He bent his arms at the thought till the brass cut to the bone. They would not burst —his hair was still too short. The madness was gone in a moment. Suppose he broke away, could a sightless man escape from a city, from a land of his foes?

The day of Dagon came. The walls of Gaza were festooned, the streets were hung with colors, and the city crowded with people. Priests had come from Ashdod, and the lords from over all Philistia. The square low temple of Dagon was covered with garlands and about the image of the Fish-God himself were fruits of the soil and sea, altars smoking with burnt-offering and censors breathing perfume through the court.

Gaza had never known such a holiday. There was no room in the temple court for the people. Long before the captive Israelite appeared, the spectators had begun to gather upon the roof, three thousand men and women, waiting.

At the first sight of him, bowed, blind, hairy, and grizzled by the prison life, a murmur of fear arose, then the clanking of his chains was heard, and a shout of praise went up to Dagon. "Our god," they cried, "hath delivered into our

hand our enemy, the destroyer of our country, who hath slain many." And after the great sacrifice of thanksgiving was offered, the strong man was jeered, buffeted and tortured with hot irons, with knives and the lash. A little boy was made to lead him about in derision. The once mighty man, the slayer of hundreds, dragged like a sheep by a lad!

The boy had stopped between the two great stone pillars that upheld the center of the roof. Samson knew the temple of old. He had seen it before and now he saw it all again through his sightless eyes. The shouts of the crowd told of the numbers upon the roof. There was a tremor in the very pillar, as he laid his hand against it, so heavy was the multitude.

He had endured in silence, in dumb patient waiting, he knew not why—till he touched the central pillar. Its tremor thrilled him. It had come, the moment, the revenge for which he had suffered and waited!

A moment he stood, then bent down to the lad that held him by the hand and said,

"Suffer me that I may feel these pillars, that I may lean upon them." The lad loosed his hold. Samson put his arms about them, his wide shoulders moving freely between.

He was speaking. The noise of the multitude ceased. A hush fell upon the temple, for he had uttered no word before. What was he saying?

"O Lord God, remember me, I pray thee, and strengthen me, I pray thee, only this once, O God, that I may be at once avenged of the Philistines for my two eyes." Deeper grew the silence. "O Lord God, remember me, and let me die with the Philistines!" And raising his eyeless face toward heaven he tightened his hold upon the pillars, and bowed himself with all his might.

A cry of horror, a crash, a cloud of dust and the prayer of the Nazarite was answered.

VII

Abigail

JUST how Nabal came to have the fair and spirited Abigail to wife we do not know; but one thing is certain—he was none of her choosing.

Sour, surly, stingy, he had a reputation for being the richest, meanest man from Jerusalem to Beersheba. And along with the possession of this reputation, he had the most beautiful wife between the gates of Dan and the walls of Reho-both.

Nabal was an exceedingly wealthy herdsman. His pastures extended over a wide range of valleys along the edge of the wilderness of Paran, where, at times, he had feeding as many as three thousand sheep and a thousand goats. These pastures were free, fertile, and almost without bound, except by a distinct danger line on the side of the wilderness. Nabal had prospered by boldness. He had pushed farther out toward the wilds than his neighbors, where the grass was shared by no other flocks. He had

lost more, but he had also gained more; yet there was a limit beyond which his herders refused to go.

The wilderness was the hiding place of every sort of outlaw; it was overrun with robber bands that lived and fattened on pillage, that made life for the border herdsmen a ceaseless round of watching and fighting. Beside these, the hills were full of dens, where wolves, bears, and leopards lurked till nightfall, when they too came forth to worry the flocks.

There was a king in Jerusalem, but his power stopped at the edge of the wilderness. Law and order were unknown here; no captain, judge, or king had ever ruled among these rocky hills —none until David, the young pretender, was driven here by Saul.

David was a Bethlehemite, a descendant of the Moabitess Ruth, whom the priest Samuel, by strange leading, had already anointed to succeed Saul as king. A chain of events had made it plain to Saul that the succession was certain unless he cut short the career that was threatening his throne; and in his jealousy and hate he had tried, but failing, had driven David like a wild beast to the wilderness mountains.

Here, with four hundred followers, with a

cave for a camp, the future king waited his time; and while he waited he watched the wilderness and made himself its king, bringing law and order to the hills. His own band was essentially one of robbers held in check. They were not there to pillage, burn, and murder; it was not to escape the law, he gave them to understand; but to wait, to bide the wrath of Saul and the coming of the day when he should return as king. Meantime he must be a king. And he was. The whole wilderness felt his power, the shepherds most of all, and none of these more than Nabal.

Farther and farther up the valleys Nabal pushed his flocks, deeper in among the rich, ungrazed pastures. Some of his herders wandered even to the neighborhood of the Cave of Adullam, the stronghold of David, and mingled with his men without losing a sheep. When the time of shearing came, they led back such flocks to Carmel as Nabal had never seen come from the wilderness before.

And all the time the band was harried by Saul as a hare by hounds. Back and forth among the passes shifted the four hundred, subsisting on the scanty meat of the wilderness and such as the shepherds, in their gratitude, of-

fered; but never foraging among the flocks that had wandered into their hands.

During the weeks preceding the sheep-shearing Saul made a determined effort to hunt down the young Bethlehemite, pressing him from pass to pass, from mountain to mountain, scattering his band and allowing him no chance to rest. Food was scarce at this season, and when the chase was given up the hounded band was worn out and starving.

Camp was made near the village of Carmel, where Nabal's herdsmen had driven his sheep for the shearing. The shearing, like the threshing, was a festive season. The choicest of the flocks were slaughtered and meat was plentiful. When, therefore, someone suggested to David that it was shearing time, and that Nabal had rounded his flocks at Carmel yonder, ten men were picked and dispatched to the village to beg a gift of meat.

It was no more than a stranger might ask. But this was no ordinary stranger's request. It had been a year of peace and great prosperity along the border. At constant risk of life and with constant trouble and care David had protected the shepherds, both against the robbers and wolves and against the men of his own

band. Nabal knew all this, even better than most of the shepherds; and who, than he, thought the young king, would more gladly acknowledge his debt by a gift of meat in this time of need!

Clad in skins, long-haired and haggard, the ten men appeared in the village of tents where the shearing was going on. They looked as wild and fierce as the wilderness itself. They had fought and hid like beasts since the soldiers of Saul entered the hills a month before. The wilderness had never let loose a more desperate-looking set; but they had their commands from David.

They might easily have swooped down and carried off what they wanted. Instead, they walked quietly into Nabal's tent, and, in David's name, saluted the shepherd with the peace greeting.

Their errand was soon told.

"Who is David? Who is the son of Jesse?" answered Nabal.

"He is the anointed of Israel," they replied. "He has been driven into the wilds by Saul. Ask thy herdsmen," they continued, "for they were with us in the hills. Did we do them harm? Did they lose a sheep? Let us find favor

in thine eyes, and give us whatever is at hand, for the sake of thy son David."

A hard, evil smile twisted and writhed about the thin lips of Nabal.

"To my son David? David of the wilderness?" adding, with a sneer, as he turned away toward the stream, "There are many servants nowadays that break away from their masters. Give my shearers' meat to men whom I know not?" And he was gone with a backward glance of surly defiance.

They had no command to run the churl through; none even to seize what they needed. But they sent a curse after him that made the herdsmen start who heard it. Empty and smarting they hurried back to David, who was waiting at the camp.

They did not spare the story. Sent away empty and stung with a taunt! And this from the man whom they had protected at their risk and loss!

"Your swords!" was the command. "By the name of the Most High, we will have meat today, and blood too. Have I kept all that this fellow had in the wilderness, so that not a sheep was lost, and he pays me evil for good? God do so to me, and more also, if I leave of all

he has, by morning light, so much as one male child!"

The band was in motion, moving rapidly down on Carmel where Nabal was still reckoning his gains at the expense of the young fool in the wilderness, who must soon fall into the hands of King Saul.

The curse of David's messengers fell on deaf ears with Nabal, but not so with his herdsmen. They knew the wilderness and the ways of these wilderness men, and they trembled. Evil was coming, and that speedily. But it was useless to warn Nabal. He was a narrow-minded, stiff-necked churl, stubborn and greedy every herdsman of them knew. If anything was to be done, it must be done quickly, and there was but one to do it.

Nabal's reputation for sordidness was not so wide as his wife's for graciousness. Beautiful, resourceful, and generous, she was really behind the man's success, saving him continually from his overreaching greed. As instinctively as one shunned Nabal one turned to Abigail. The men had hardly disappeared among the hills, when one of the shearers, who had heard the curse, hastened with the whole tale to Abigail.

She understood. There was no time to lose. Without question or leave she took two hundred loaves of bread, wine, corn, fruits, and the five sheep that were ready dressed, and loading them upon asses, started with her servants on the trail for the camp in the wilderness.

She hoped to intercept the band. She was none too soon. The village still showed behind her when, rounding a point in the hills, she saw a line of men filing rapidly through a deep wady below her. She quickened the mules.

At the same moment the advancing men caught sight of her, and the line quickened its pace, for it recognized her as belonging to the house of Nabal. The faint shout that came up the valley was the vengeance cry of the hounded, outlawed men, now, themselves turned hounds, eager, cruel, thirsty for blood.

David led up the slope. But down to meet him came Abigail. Putting her servants behind her and throwing her veil back from her beautiful, compelling face, she advanced alone.

Had she only come with swords instead of eyes, had she been in armor with a shield of steel, instead of in clinging linen robes, had she been Goliath or the devil, he would have

won. But she was a woman—sweeping down upon him like a dream of paradise—and he lost.

For David was more poet than warrior. He could fight what he hated; he could only worship what he loved.

Without waiting for him to speak, giving him only time to look full into her beseeching eyes, the lovelier now for their fear and firm resolve, she clasped his feet.

"Upon me, my lord, upon me be the curse," she sobbed. "I pray thee regard not this son of Belial, this Nabal; for his name is Nabal—'Fool'—and folly is with him. But I am thine handmaid. I saw not the young men whom thou didst send. Forgive my trespass, and, this present which I have brought, give it to thy young men. And the Lord will make thee a new house. No evil shall be found in thee. Thy soul shall be bound in the bundle of life with the Lord thy God. He shall make thee prince over Israel. Then it shall be no grief to thee that my lord has not avenged himself," and lifting her face toward his she added, softly, "When the Lord shall have dealt well with thee, remember then thine handmaid."

And he replied, as he bent low to raise her,

"Blessed be the Lord who sent thee to meet me, and blessed be thy wisdom, and blessed be thou who hast kept me this day from bloodguiltiness. Go up in peace to thine house. I have accepted thee."

Ten days later Nabal was smitten with disease and died. David was yet far from the throne, but when he sent from the wilderness for Abigail, "she hasted and arose and rode upon an ass with five damsels of hers that followed her; and she went after the messengers of David and became his wife."

VIII

"Passing the Love of Woman"

THE moonlight fell in a soft, wide band across the figured floor; a slight breeze played with the curtains of the open window and brought the breath of the garden into the dim moonlit room; a sparrow woke in the orange tree without and sent a song of love pulsing through the sweet night silence; and farther away, from the palm at the back of the palace, floated in the low, mournful notes of a dove.

The bar of silver lay between an old man and a maiden, a girl as fair as the fragrant moonlight night, and a youth, in the dress of a prince. They were lovers, and had come for a blessing.

At the call of the dove the old man leaned forward to listen. The silver of the moon mingled with the silver of the waving hair about his face—a face of wondrous strength, of majesty even and exalted pose. There was no need of a crown for that head. Its very pose

was royal. Israel never had but one countenance like that—but one king, one psalmist, one man of whom it was written, "He was after God's own heart."

He had fallen back into the shadow again and was speaking:

"Love? Yes, I have loved, but not as I have been loved. The love of man and woman is the heat of the flame and fagot. It burns, and the embers may soon smolder and grow cold. But the love of a man for a man is the burning of the sun. It cannot die into ember, into cold gray ash. In my youth I was loved by a son of Saul with a love passing the love of woman.

"How beautiful he was! A king by right of all that blood and nobleness could give, tall, strong and quick as the roebuck, with a face more gentle than the twilight and a spirit of the freshness and fragrance of spring.

"I had seen him before, when I was armor-bearer to King Saul, but our first meeting was in his father's tent on the battlefield of the water-course of Elah. It was the day I came with Abner, holding the head of Goliath in my hand. The warriors without the tent were shouting of my deed. The king had forgotten

me—strange it seemed then—and was asking who I was, not wholly pleased, I noticed, at the shouts outside, nor at the sight of the Philistine's head in my hand. I think he wished it back upon its own shoulders. While he was speaking Jonathan stood behind him, watching me.

"I was turning to go when the young prince rushed forward, threw his arms about me and kissed my cheek. Then he stripped off his cloak and cast it over me, unbuckled his sword and forced it into my hand, and with his loosened girdle bound me about the loins.

"Astonishment made me dumb. I was too abashed to resist. Who was I, the son of Jesse, that the son of Saul should make me captain with his own royal robe and sword?

" 'Nay! nay!' he said, forestalling my protest with his finger on my lips, 'These things are mine. I shall do as I wish. No word, not one. Now they belong to you, wear them, for my soul is knit with yours.'

"Then embracing me again, he took my hand and led me to his own tent. Here he listened while I told him of the hills, of the flocks, the beasts, the nights of watching with

the stars; of how, from across the brook, I had seen the unprotected forehead of Goliath, and how I had slung the stone. I told him the whole short tale of my shepherd life; and he heard it eagerly, for there had lighted in his deep, dark eyes the light of a love that shone upon me till the light of his life was darkness, till he fell on the bloody slopes of Gilboa.

"Ah, Jonathan, Jonathan, thou shouldst have been king, not I!

"For he *was* king, king by blood and king by his father's favor. Saul loved him with a father's, with a king's love and hope. Through all these years, after all this life of mine, I cannot yet tell why I was chosen over Jonathan; unless he was too pure, too noble, too true a man to be a king. Yet all of this a king should be—should be. Ah, how far short your king has come!

"But greater mystery than this, than all, save the mystery of the love of our God, was the love of Jonathan for me. Love knows no cost, no sacrifice. It is the sum of all wealth, more than all joy; the only human possession that is fairer, richer, sweeter, realer than our dreams.

"Jonathan loved me—loved me when he saw me destined to wear his crown, to rule his king-

dom, to receive the homage of his people and the glory of nations that was his. Saul also saw that I was chosen. But he carried a javelin for my heart.

"That day at Elah we made a covenant to deal kindly one with the other, before the Lord. How much it meant I little knew; nor he how much that oath would cost!

"Jonathan had made me a captain; and the king, for he loved his son, was gracious, and gave me a command in the field. The soldiers hailed me. I had slain Goliath; alone I had put a Philistine army to flight. I was accepted as leader with the wildest, fiercest faith. Strange tales concerning me, moreover, spread through the enemies' camps; tales that brought panic and dread. 'Tis small wonder that victory followed victory till my name was upon every tongue; till what Saul had dreamed concerning me seemed almost in a day accomplished. He had hated me from the first in his heart. Something occurred on our return from the wars that brought his feelings to the open.

"We were approaching Jerusalem with the king at our head, when the women of the city came out to meet us, singing and dancing. It

was the king's war and the king's victory, and the praise should have been his, no matter what captain led the charge. But above the sounds of the cymbals, the tabrets and harps I heard and the king heard, over and over,

'Saul hath slain his thousands,
And David his ten thousands,'

sung by a thousand throats, a constantly repeated refrain.

"I was ashamed, and fell behind, where I could not see the rage and jealousy that blackened the king's face.

"On the morrow he sent for me to bring my harp, he wished to hear me play. I knew the evil spirit had come upon him. At such times it drove him mad; he lost reason; he neither ate nor slept nor spake until the madness wore itself out and left him, when he was like a babe. Again and again I had broken the spell with my harp; for I had caught a strain from the hills that even a lean and famished wolf would wait to hear.

"He was sitting with his face upon his breast, his great hands knotted, his head uncovered, uncrowned, his robe about his feet. At his side hung a sword, and leaning against the seat

at the opposite side, with its sharp point on the floor, stood a javelin. If he knew, he gave no sign, as I entered.

"I had never seen him so fearful, so brutish. Seating myself upon a low bench near, I touched the harp. A note from the far away, a chord out of the heart of childhood, floated through the room. It was the strain of the hills, that something from the twilight and the flock-in-fold that had breathed across my strings. Before this I had seen it steal through his darkened soul like a ray of light through a shuttered hall. But not this time.

"As I played the huge head rose slowly till the bloodshot eyes burned through the gloom upon me. He thought me rapt, that I did not see his hand slipping stealthily down the javelin shaft. But he was the mad one, not I; and an instant later when the heavy spear sank half its head's length into the wall my head was not pinned with it. I bent as he hurled, and the javelin grazed my neck. My fingers never paused nor missed a note. Indeed the danger, the narrow chance of life, was like a strange wild waking in me, and passed, a soul of fire, into my harp.

"Murder, terror, wonder flashed and fled

from the staring eyes of the king. It was not at me, but at the harp he glared, as I have seen a leopard glare when suddenly fixed by the terror of human eyes. He would have backed away from the thing had he dared. I played on; and when again the royal face, all working with hate and shame, fell forward, and he did not see, I passed softly from his presence, leaving my harp hanging on the shaft of the javelin in the wall.

"That was the beginning of a long and bitter struggle. The king sought to save the throne for Jonathan, but the deep, stubborn love of Jonathan for me continually thwarted him.

"I told no one of the king's javelin; but Jonathan, coming into the chamber soon after, seeing my harp upon the javelin shaft and the king sunk in the stupor of his madness, was quick to understand.

"Yet the king kept his council. He knew of the love and the covenant between us; and he feared to test the loyalty of his son even by the bribe of a throne. So he began secretly to plot my destruction. I was sent upon hazardous expeditions, was left in the field without support, was promised his daughter to wife for

an almost impossible feat. But I won the wife. I came out of every difficulty stronger, surer, more feared and hated by the king.

"Failing to compass the end by stratagem and treachery, he finally called Jonathan, together with all the spies and courtiers, told them that I was plotting for the throne, and commanded them to slay me secretly and by any means.

"In the evening of that day Jonathan and I walked alone to the valley of Jehosaphat, where he told me what Saul had done. I was expecting it. My heart was heavy for Jonathan. For myself there was little to fear in the camp; never were warriors more loyal than these to me. At a word they would have followed me even in revolt. Jonathan was a prince and Saul's son. A kingdom could not have tempted his love to treachery, but he had rather lose his life than disobey his father's and his king's command.

"Whether that night, or whether he ever felt that I was to be king in his stead, I am not sure. I think he did, though he never uttered such a thought to me. And it was not that night, but long, long after, indeed, before I saw that my steps were drawing toward the throne.

Samuel had poured the horn of oil upon my head, I know, and hopes and dreams had filled the hills with beauty ever since; but not one dream of crowns and purple robes and palaces among them! Only the sweeter dreams of song.

"Jonathan, that night, as always, planned to shield me. He would plead with the king to revoke the command and to restore me to his presence and favor. Saul was easily persuaded; he was rarely right and seldom had the strength of a real conviction. A few days later Jonathan brought me from the tents unto his father, who bade me come at twilight with my harp and play to him as I had been wont to do, and this once last I soothed the warring soul.

"So all was well again until another war broke out, and more honors came to me. Then Saul's suspicion and jealousy were stirred once more; and one night, as I was playing, he was seized with the madness and cast another javelin at me.

"I was off my guard, and so close was the escape, that I fled, vowing never to see him again. Indeed, I came near to having no other chance; for spies were put after me, and a band

of murderers to fetch me—dead, if they could not bring me alive for the king to kill.

"It was his own daughter, Michal, that thwarted him this time. She was as true a wife to me as Jonathan was a brother. The cunning dummy that she placed in my bed served so well for the sick captain, that I was far on the road to Naioth, in Ramah, before the fools returned with their sorry tale to the king.

"He pursued me thither, and finally, beside himself at the failure of every band to take me, he started himself. But the evil spirit came into him so that he went insane for a time and lay like one dead all day and all night before Samuel, who he had thought was shielding me. Meantime I had returned to the wild hills about Jerusalem to see Jonathan. I was weary of being hunted, of not knowing who were friends or foes, of my position as captain in one camp of the king and as outlaw in the other camps on whose head a price was set. I should know once for all whether the king would have me fight henceforth for him or against him.

" 'What have I done? What is my iniquity, my sin before your father, that he seeks my life?' I demanded of Jonathan.

"I can see the sorrow in his sensitive face

even yet. It was yonder in the garden, in the early twilight, and a dove was cooing in the mellow distance as this one is mourning now.

" 'God forbid; you shall not die; my father will do nothing but that he will show it to me. He will not hide this from me. Will you trust me?'

" 'But he knows that you love me. He will not grieve you with this. Yet truly as the Lord liveth there is but a step between me and death.'

" 'David,' he answered, 'whatever your soul desires, I will do it for you.'

" 'Behold,' I said, 'to-morrow is the new moon and I should not fail to sit with the king at meat, but let me go and hide myself in the field until the evening of the third day of the feast. If your father at all miss me then tell him that I asked your leave to run to Bethlehem, my city, to attend a sacrifice for all my family. If he is not displeased, it will mean peace; but if he be very wroth, then be sure that he has determined evil against me. Deal kindly with me, for you have brought me into a covenant with you before the Lord. But if iniquity be in me, slay me yourself. Why bring me to your father?'

" 'Far be it from me, David. If I knew that evil were determined by my father against you, would I not tell you? Have I not told you?'

"And taking my arm he added, 'Come, let us go out into the fields.'

"We went on down the valley to the Kedron. There, in the silent starlight upon a rock by the murmuring stream, the Prince of the House of Saul prayed.

" 'O Lord God of Israel, when I have searched my father if there be good toward David and I send not unto him and show it to him, then thou, O Lord, do so and much more to me. But if there be evil toward him, then will I show him, and send him away that he may go in peace. And thou, O Lord, be with him, as thou hast been with my father. And he shall not only, while I yet live, show me the kindness of the Lord, that I die not, but he shall not cut off his kindness from my house forever, no, not when thou, O Lord, hast cut off the enemies of David everyone from the earth.'

"It was this prayer by the Kedron which has always made me feel that he knew what his love at least might cost. Jonathan paid that cost with his life.

"There that night we renewed our covenant; and Jonathan made a plan for informing me concerning the king, without himself betraying my hiding place.

"I was to go on the evening of the third day of new moon to the stone Ezel. He was to come in the morning of the next day and shoot three arrows past the stone as if he shot at a mark, sending a lad after them and commanding him so that I could hear. If he told the lad the arrows were on his right or left it meant peace, and I could come to the city; if he said they were beyond him, it meant danger, and I must depart.

"As he left me that night he looked into my eyes and said,

" 'Touching the matter which you and I have spoken of, behold, the Lord be between you and me forever.'

"The three days of waiting were full of danger and full of weary, dragging hours. It was not till long afterward that I heard of all that happened in the palace during those three days; how Saul demanded me and was told by Jonathan I had been excused to go to Bethlehem, how the king had risen in his anger, hissing, 'Thou son of the perverse, rebellious

woman, do I not know that thou hast chosen the son of Jesse to thine own confusion, and to the confusion of thy mother's nakedness? For as long as he liveth upon the ground, thou shalt not be established, nor thy kingdom. Fetch him unto me for he shall die.' Jonathan could not tell me this, nor could he tell me that the king finished speaking with hurling a javelin at him.

"On the morning of the appointed day he came with the lad to the rock. The three arrows flew past. I listened. Clear and plain, but with a break of pain in his voice that hurt me deeper than the danger in the words, he called, as the lad came opposite the rock: 'Is not the arrow beyond thee?'

"The three were quickly gathered and the unsuspecting lad sent back to the city. I watched him out of sight, then arose. We were together and alone.

"I could not look upon him, but fell on my face to the ground. He raised me and kissed me, his tears mingling with mine.

"Calming himself he said, 'Go in peace, my brother; forasmuch as we have sworn both of us in the name of the Lord, saying, The Lord

be between me and thee and between my seed and thy seed forever.'

"And he watched me till the hills shut in between, till I was far on my way to Nob—the way that at the last led me back to Jerusalem, to his throne, his kingdom and the glory that was his.

"It was our last farewell. When I stood by Ezel again, he slept, with the king, his father, under the shadows of the oak at Jabesh."

He ceased speaking.

Through the window the moonlight fell upon him, its mellow glory kindling in his dreaming eyes to a halo that shone about the noble face till it seemed divinely transfigured. The breeze had quickened to a sigh in the garden trees, the birds were sleeping; the young lovers who had listened, sat silent, waiting.

The harp of the king, the harp that the shepherd boy had played upon to Saul, stood by his side. His hand had been hanging idly by the strings. Soon a note, as soft and sweet as the moonlight, filled the room. He drew the old harp up close to his heart, and gazing far out into the night, out toward the valley and the mountains, he began to sing the song he had first sung so long before!

"Thy glory, O Israel, is slain upon thy high places!
How are the mighty fallen!
Tell it not in Gath,
Publish it not in the streets of Ashkelon;
Lest the daughters of the Philistines rejoice,
Lest the daughters of the uncircumcised triumph.
Ye mountains of Gilboa,
Let there be no dew nor rain upon you, neither fields of offerings:
For there the shield of the mighty was defiled,
The shield of Saul, as of one not anointed.
From the blood of the slain, from the fat of the mighty
The bow of Jonathan turned not back,
And the sword of Saul returned not empty.
Saul and Jonathan were lovely and pleasant in their lives,
And in their death they were not divided.
They were swifter than eagles.
They were stronger than lions.
Ye daughters of Israel, weep over Saul
Who clothed you in scarlet delicately,
Who put ornaments of gold upon your apparel.
How are the mighty fallen in the midst of the battle!
Jonathan is slain upon thy high places.
I am distressed for thee, my brother Jonathan:
Very pleasant hast thou been unto me.
Thy love to me was wonderful,
Passing the love of women.
How are the mighty fallen,
And the weapons of war perished!"

Silence fell again, and the moonlight, with the wind whispering in the trees.

IX

The Maid of Shunem[1]

THE voice of bugles rolled up the slopes of Tabor and echoed back across the lower hills of Shunem, mellow, faint, and silvery sweet. The king was coming. Yonder on the heights beyond Nain flashed the gleam of burnished armor and the gold-and-purple flecks of banners. The people of the villages gathered in the street, while, along the highways between the towns, waited shepherds of the mountains east of Endor, fishermen who had come from the shores of Genezareth; herdsmen of Jezreel, and vinedressers from the west, as far as the base of Carmel—all watching; for the king, with part of his court, was journeying in the north and would pass that way toward Jerusalem.

On a ridge, beyond the level fields surround-

[1] This story occurs in the Old Testament in the form of a lyrical drama, under the title, "The Song of Solomon" or "The Song of Songs." For dramatis personæ, stage setting, parts, etc., see *Driver's Introduction to the Literature of the Old Testament.* For further study of the drama, see the author's article "The Old Song of Solomon—The New Song of Songs," in the *Methodist Review* (South), November-December, 1899—D. L. S.

ing Shunem, with a sloping vineyard between her and the road, stood a girl, watching like the rest. She was a child of the hills; a peasant, but slender, fair, and with a face as beautiful as the morning. Her long dark hair was free, her simple summer robe, passing over one shoulder and under the other, was girded at the waist, and hung nearly to her bare and dainty ankles, outlining a form as supple, young and lovely as her face, framed in its flowing hair. She could not have been older than fifteen; though this she must have been, for hanging from her neck was a piece of silver money—the pledge of her betrothal.

The royal retinue drew near and halted under the old olives at the foot of the vineyard. The grapes were in bloom, and the king stopped to drink the perfume that lay sweet and heavy on the road. He loved the odor, and, not content to breathe it from a distance, left his chariot, and with two or three officers, leaped the wall to take it fresh from the lips of the vines.

The girl upon the ridge, seeing the company halt, came down the vineyard for a closer view, taking care to keep well hidden among the thick, rank leaves. She was half way to the

road, when, gliding in among the vines, she found herself face to face with three men—one in royal purple, whom she knew was Solomon, the king.

For a moment king and country maid looked at each other; the man forgetful of the sweetness of the grapes; the girl startled, curious, fixed with admiration. But before the king recovered far enough to speak, the maid had done obeisance and fled like a roe among the green.

"I must have her," cried the king, and an officer sprang away in the direction taken by the frightened girl. She had not expected this, and was surprised again and forced to return. Bidding the men wait for him at the chariots, the king and the girl were left together alone.

Solomon's eye for beauty was unerring. He was a philosopher and a king; he loved learning and he loved his realm; but more than wisdom, more than kingdom, he loved a beautiful woman. He had built the Temple of Jehovah, it is true; but close beside it stood his own palace, as gorgeous a shrine to the Goddess of Love as any heathen ever dedicated. And he had gone up and down, over and across the world in his worship, bringing here the loveli-

est, fairest forms that could be found; until he had sixty wives, eighty concubines, and maidens without number. His heart was as insatiable for fresh wives as his own Dead Sea for fresh waters.

Among all these was an Egyptian princess, who had held first place in his heart until this vision in the vineyard had flashed before him. He had seen this peasant girl and had forgotten the princess.

Solomon was king—by divine right—and what was, was his; but how to get it, in this case, began to trouble him. He was not well acquainted with peasants. If this vineyard had only been a court, this free, barefoot girl a princess! It was one thing to ask a Pharaoh for his daughter's hand, and quite another thing, even for a king, to make an independent country girl give her hand when her heart was already pledged to a young shepherd.

At first he was charmed with her resistance, it was so rare, so fresh an experience for a king, a flashing eye, a burning cheek, a heaving bosom, a clenched fist—a storm all lit with beauty like a tempest in the summer!

He coaxed her; but she would not yield. He put the royal purple on her shoulders, and

she flung it to the ground. He took the jeweled band from his brow, and, placing it on hers, called her queen. She tore it off, cast it at his feet, and turned to flee. He caught her. He could crush her, for he was king; but he had never seen such loveliness, and to crush it were to lose it.

Terror came into her eyes, her strength forsook her, and she screamed for help. Dare any help against a king? He took her in his arms and spoke gently. He would not, did not harm her; but she wept and prayed to be let go. He only drew her closer and multiplied his promises and his words of love. The kingdom should be hers if she would give her heart and go to Jerusalem with him as his bride. She pointed to the pledge about her neck and begged for mercy; but he gently snapped the chain, and lifting her clear, carried her, half-smothered, to the chariots. And the train moved on toward Jerusalem.

Solomon was wise. It was wisdom that he had asked and been granted of Heaven; and if that gift were wanting in any particular touching women, the lack had been made good through experience.

What cannot be done with a simple, fright-

ened girl in her father's vineyard, he argued, may be accomplished at the court of a king. In the vineyard he wooed unaided. The girl had never seen a court; she knew nothing of the pageantry and splendor of life; she had never seen herself. Bring her here; dress her like a queen, let her see her beauty, feel the jealousy of her rivals, receive with him the homage of the world—and if he was powerless in the vineyard, admiration, self-love, and ambition should be strong for him here.

He smiled. The game pleased him. The palace against a hut? The court against the country? The king against a shepherd? No need to force her. There never lived a woman since the first one was beguiled who could not be taken with the show of royal purple. He would enjoy the wooing. And he placed the maiden in the keeping of the eunuchs.

So she found herself a queen, in robes of needlework and gold of Ophir, with slaves at her beck, with the fairest women of the court for her companions, with a palace all her own —and a king. She was beautiful in the vineyard; but here she wore the purple and the jewels as the Lebanon cedar wore its royal

green and gleaming cones. The magnificence of the palace, the splendor of the court she gathered to herself, and gave the glory back with an added light that brought the king in worship to her feet.

It was only yesterday that her shepherd-lover came to the little white-walled hut, bringing her a jar of honey from the wild bees in the hills. Yet that time was far away, so far that she could hardly think back to it. Yet the present seemed farther still away, for it was all a dream.

The days wore on: the past receding farther and farther; the glamour, the excitement, the intoxication of the life about her growing nearer and more her own. Yet the king made little progress. His passion quickened, and so did his pride, for, more than the submission of an empire, he desired to have this stubborn, peerless beauty yield for love and admiration. He wooed her as only the richest of kings could woo. But Solomon had not prayed to Heaven for power to love and win. Of that the ignorant, ardent shepherd knew more than the king.

The winter was gone. The warm, live light of a new spring was felt even within the walled

city; the first birds were returning, the earliest flowers opening, and the green creeping over field and orchard. And the day, set by the king for the wedding, was coming nearer.

That wedding day was to have been celebrated in the vineyard at Shunem, when the grapes had leafed a bower and made the air all incense with their sweet perfume. How the breath of the spring carried her back! With the approach of the day when the king should take her, came a yearning for the fresh home hills, her father's hut, and the love that a lad had given her. She had not consented yet; but the king had commanded, and she must yield.

Commanding was not winning; and Solomon set more snares, and worked every charm in his power to conquer. Up to this time she had guarded well her heart, answering him always as she answered the court ladies who tried to entice and persuade her, when she said: "By the roes and the hinds of the fields I charge you that ye stir not up nor awaken love till it please."

Yet the king was gaining. Time wears and weakens. The strange, golden year of captivity, of luxury, of flattery and attention had had

its effect. Besides, she saw no hope of finally keeping him from his desire. He understood; but while he waited he worked. There was no woman, not one, no beautiful, spirited peasant girl, with all to gain, whose love and fidelity could hold out against the promises of a king —against him. He would yet seduce her; he would fan a passion in her which should burn a thousand times more fiercely than the hottest of the flames that roared in the laystall at the bottom of Gehenna. And that first girl-love? It should crisp and blacken and disappear.

He had not yet showed the maiden all it meant to be his queen. She had never seen the world upon its knees before him; she had never seen him glorious in his robes of state, in the crown of his father David, as captain and king of Israel. But now she must look upon him, not only in his beauty, but in his glory; for the wedding day was very near, and she must be won.

It was done in the name of Solomon, King of Israel, and "for the Fairest of Women whom the King would make his Queen." Heralds carried the proclamation of holiday to the

edges of the kingdom, and on, into kingdoms far remote.

Jerusalem was aflame with color; the city had never shone so gorgeously before. Kings and queens from distant courts looked on with wonder. Even the imagination which conceived it had scarcely pictured the pageant so dazzling, so like the blazing sun, as it now came moving through the streets toward the palace —and toward a woman waiting there.

It was all for her. From the porch she looked out upon the multitude—a gay and eager tide that poured through every street, that rose to every window and overflowed across the low flat housetops. She listened. From the far quarters of the city rolled the wide, wordless cry of the throng as the king passed through the streets. Over the earth-roar of the multitude floated the aërial notes of silver trumpets, like a response from the skies. She felt the very marble of the palace thrill and tremble beneath her feet.

Louder, clearer grew the hosannas, and soon the spears and shields of the men of war at the head of the procession appeared.

First came the spearmen, then the archers and slingers, then the chariots, behind which

she saw the milk-white mules bearing the litter of the king. Following the king came the gold and ivory cars sent by Pharaoh from the Nile; then the royal officers of Sheba; sailors of Tyre and Sidon; strange, fierce warriors from beyond the Great River; and priests of an hundred gods.

A hush fell upon the crowded spectators. The soldiers on foot went past; the clanging, rocking chariots rolled by; and the milk-white mules, with the richest, mightiest king that ever wore the Jewish crown, came opposite the palace porch. Then, as a forest of pine struck by a wild storm wind, the multitude bent and swayed, and a voice, like the ocean's, broke about the palace, crying—

"Who is this that cometh up out of the wilderness
like pillars of smoke,
Perfumed with myrrh and frankincense?
Behold, it is the litter of Solomon,
Threescore mighty men are about it,
Of the mighty men of Israel.
It is made of the wood of Lebanon,
With pillars of silver;
With bottom of gold;
With seat of purple,
And paved in the midst with love
From the daughters of Jerusalem.
Go forth, O ye daughters of Zion, and behold
King Solomon."

That night she sat far into the quiet hours, looking out over the sleeping city, over the dark valley toward the Mount of Olives. The night's hush lay deep as death, but ever on the silence rolled the chorus—

"Who is this that cometh up out of the wilderness like pillars of smoke?"

The scene flamed and glowed and passed again before her against the darkness in the Valley of the Kedron.

"The moon's gold on yonder mountain," she murmured, "is pale against my gleaming garments. My father's hut—how mean, how like a fox's den beside these cedar-pillared halls! A shepherd-lover! Remember him when I can be a queen?" And again the shining litter moved across the valley and the chorus, with its sea-voice, cried again, "Who is this that cometh up out of the wilderness?"

Then as she wavered, from the shadows of the palms beneath her window, someone spoke, eager, pleading, but in the darkness and the depth, calling as out of the distant past:

"Rise up, my love, my fair one, and come away.
For, lo, the winter is past,
The rain is over and gone;
The flowers appear on the earth;

The time of the singing of birds is come,
And the voice of the turtle is heard in our land;
The fig tree ripeneth her green figs
And the vines are in blossom,
They give forth their fragrance.
Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away."

It was no dream. She knew that voice. Its tones were sweeter than the sound of running waters in the desert. The silence came again, but the sound of the chorus had died far away. The moon swung up above the mountain, flooding the valley of the Kedron where the milk-white mules had passed—flooding the valley and letting fall its soft, sweet light aslant the palace walls. She leaned from the lattice and saw him; and he heard, scarcely whispered through the palms, "Thou art come, my beloved?"

When the silver trumpets from the pinnacle of the Temple woke the day, and the gates in the city walls swung open, a humble shepherd and a maid, upon a donkey, passed out and took the highroad toward the north. A second morning dawned, and yet a third. As the gray light warmed and crimsoned on the hills, the shepherd and the maid were mounting a ridge beyond the Plains of Jezreel. Beneath them

lay the village of Shunem. They turned and looked back across Samaria, toward Judæa and Jerusalem, and the maid, slipping her hand into her companion's, with a light flashing swifter than the morning's in her dark eyes, said:

"Set me as a seal upon thine heart, as a seal upon thine arm:
For love is strong as death.
Jealousy is cruel as the grave,
The flashes thereof are the flashes of fire,
A very flame of the Lord.
Many waters cannot quench love,
Neither can the floods drown it:
If a man would give all the substance of his house for love,
He would utterly be contemned."

X

A Daughter of Ahab

HAVE you ever been fanned at night by a shadowy, blood-sucking vampire? Ever waited, with a step unfinished, for a glittering, swaying viper to strike? Ever clutched a broken spear with a wounded leopard creeping, crouching for a spring? I have—for six years—with the bat, the snake, the tiger crouching, coiling, hovering all together, all in one woman—in one woman's shape; for Athaliah was not a woman: she was a devil.

You could expect nothing better of a daughter of Ahab. Her marriage with Jehoram was the blot on the record of good King Jehoshaphat. How his sin has been visited upon his children's children! She fed on their blood. Destruction attended her. And more even than Jehu, the appointed enemy, she fulfilled the curse that lay upon the house of her father.

Jehoshaphat slept with his fathers, and Jehoram, his son, reigned. The queen's evil influence was felt immediately. Now the Baal-

fires were kindled again. From the pinnacle of the Temple I could see the smoke ascending from an hundred hills, a stench in the nostrils of Yahweh. Once more, as in the cursed days of the Judges, the Asherah stood beneath the green trees; and every grove became a place of lust, an altar where the fairest and the purest in the land were sacrificed.

Then Jehoram died, and Ahaziah, his son, was crowned; but, following the baleful counsel of his mother, he fell into the hands of Jehu and was slain at the end of his first year.

For a moment the throne was empty; the word of the king's death, however, had hardly reached us, we had had no time to crown the heir, when there was no crown, no heir. Yes, there was a crown, but not where we could get it. The death of her son left Athaliah free. She had waited such an opportunity for years; she had been filling the posts of power with her minions, and gathering a pack of wolves into the palace, ready, when the scepter fell, to loose them on the city and seize the power for herself.

Her chance had come, and before we knew, her bloody knife was plunged into the heart of every male child of the royal line—save one, a

babe in arms, snatched by my wife and spirited away. Athaliah was queen!

We had feared her, hated her, since her viper's face was first seen within the Holy City. The day she entered Jerusalem as a bride—how well I remember!—the incense smoke hung heavy over the censor. It would not rise. I saw the anger of Yahweh in the sign; I knew his face was turned away, that his curse had fallen. From that time, through all those years, her dark genius prevailed over priest and prophet. At last she was queen, the throne of David beneath her feet.

The cloud that had been rolling thick across the land broke—a storm of lust and blood and death. But in the blackness flashed a fork of light. It happened at the morning sacrifice when she was being crowned. I was praying. Suddenly an angel of the Lord, with the sword of David in his hand, appeared above the altar, and hovering, vanished in the blue smoke of the Temple twilight toward the skies. Then I knew that I must save Israel, that Athaliah must die.

The streams of Judah ran red. If she was hated, she hated in return, and with a hate that fed upon revenge. She dared not strike

the high priest at once; yet I was marked. The knife that dripped the blood of her own grandchildren would not stay for the chosen of the Lord. The slaughter spread abroad—to every city—all who refused to bow were felled.

She did not know that the babe Joash was saved. The massacre was planned with all her evil cunning, and the work done well—too well, indeed. There were other babes in the palace, and while her creatures slayed these, the royal child and his nurse were hurried from a chamber of the palace to the high priest's house.

He was safe with us. If Athaliah had known he was alive, she could not have found him, though she turned Zion and Moriah on their tops. The high priest's house is a part of the Temple, whose secret chambers even I am in danger of forgetting. There was not a spy at court who knew all of those doors that swung in the solid walls and opened to the soft touch of the baby king.

He was not an easy secret, for there were three to keep it—two were women. But Jehoshebah also was the daughter of a king, and had matched herself against this daughter of Ahab. The nurse who escaped with the babe

well knew that her life was bound to his. So, after all, from us there was little to fear. But the child must play; he could not be denied the air and sunshine; and here lay our danger, for the streets, the very Temple courts, were full of spies. The evil woman had ears and eyes everywhere; she heard our thoughts, she saw our dreams.

She even saw the young king; but the Lord blinded her eyes that once. The boy was with me one day near the palace when the royal litter passed. The queen was quick to see. Struck by the great beauty of the child, she stopped and asked whose son he was. I bent to hide my fright, but told him with a steady voice to tell the queen his uncle's name. She scarcely heard his words for a sudden terror seized upon her. She saw a vision as the pure and happy countenance was lifted up to hers —a ghastly vision of murdered children. The vengeance of the Lord was beginning.

But the time was not ripe. "When the tale of bricks is doubled, Moses comes." She must have more time to spoil and slay and sleep—and I to work. Every day the cry to Heaven grew louder. A little longer—a year more. For Athaliah it was a fatal wait.

The babe had grown to be a child of six. By his seventh year, with Yahweh's help, he should wear the crown of his fathers, should rule the kingdom that was his.

My plans had wrought themselves out slowly. I was alone, a high priest of the Lord against a court bound to its idols and its queen. There was no help within the palace, little indeed within the city walls, for Jerusalem was polluted, soldiers, priests, rulers—all. I must trust to the cities without. Who here were the faithful to Yahweh?

I found four captains of hundreds in Jerusalem whom I swore to the cause of the young king. These I sent out to the Levites and heads of families in the cities of Judah. I had need of an army in Jerusalem. I must have the city strong with the king's men on the coronation day, so that every gate and street should be guarded and a show of force made at the Temple that could cow the soldiers of the queen.

To swear these men and get them into Jerusalem without exciting suspicion required time and care; but the captains worked quietly and with results that astonished and assured me. Soon, one by one the priests and rulers

began to come in; one from Jericho, another from Joppa; from Egron on the southern border, from Hebron and the wilderness towns. One by one they visited the Temple, took the oath, received their instructions and scattered unobserved about the city.

Jerusalem at last was full of those who were pledged to crown the young king. Now we were waiting the return of the captains and the appointed day.

I chose a Sabbath for the crowning, one at the end of the month, when the courses of the priests in the Temple were to be changed. Instead, however, of dismissing the course that had just served their term, I intended them to stay, so that, with the new course entering, there would be a hundred priests in the Temple—not an unusual occurrence, and not likely to cause suspicion.

A third of these were to guard the door, another third the king's house, and the others were to place themselves at the Gate of Foundation. The people, for the regular Sabbath worship, would gather in the courts, among whom, with hidden weapons, were to be bands of the picked men of Judah. I was to bring the king from the Temple into the court and

crown him by the Pillar of Inauguration. If there was an attack from the palace—the captains had their commands.

The Sabbath came. From the roof of the Temple I watched the dawn spread gray along the mountains of Abarim, then flash a point of fire from the head of Nebo, to glance from the gold of the Temple pinnacles and speed on across the hills of Judah to the sea. The mellow blasts of the priests' trumpets rolled over the sleeping city and called far away down the Valley of Jehoshaphat. How peaceful the earth! How gentle the coming of the day! A dove cooing from the olives along the Kedron seemed like the very voice of prayer. The sea winds were asleep, and from the hilltops round about the Holy City rose the blue smoke-columns of the Baal-fires, thin and straight toward Heaven. Should those altars ever smoke with another morning sacrifice? Not, I swore, if Jehoiada, the high priest, can prevent!

Thus far there was no sign that a word of the revolution had been heard in the palace. Mattan, the high priest of Baal, made no prayer that morning for succor, though the fire of Heaven was even then descending to lick up the very stones of his altar. Athaliah, as on

other days, left her offering at the shrine of Ashtareth and returned to the palace with the blessing of the priest.

Meanwhile the faithful of the Lord were gathering in his courts. Among the first to enter were the four captains of hundreds with companies of the picked men. For years there had hung in the Temple the swords and shields of King David—enough for a small army. These I took down now and divided among the captains, who distributed them to their men. Without sound or commotion the three divisions of priests took their positions—by the Gate of Foundation, by the king's house, at each of the Temple doors—and drawing their hidden swords, stood ready.

The congregation looked on in silent wonder. The throng had come to worship. Was it some snare, a plot of the queen's to murder all who had not bowed to Baal? The wonder turned to fear; the silence deepened to a stirless hush, a hush so deep that I seemed to hear it through the Temple walls, where I waited. A swallow darted in high up among the cedar beams and its wings beat through the gloom and stillness like the heart-throb of the waiting multitude without. I could feel every eye of

the vast congregation fixed upon the door behind which I stood with the king.

Suddenly the blast of a bugle thrilled the silence; the great Temple door swung open, and, with a horn of oil and a crown of gold in my hands, I came forth before the people, followed by a young boy with bared head, robed in shining white. On in silence we moved to the Pillar of Inauguration. The throng were dazed, breathless. Then, as the horn of oil was emptied and the golden crown placed upon the fair young brow they saw their king. An instant—and Jerusalem to the very walls echoed with shout, "God save the king!"

It broke across the city like a thunder clap. It rang through every room of the palace. There was the sound of running in the streets; the clang of gates at the palace; then more running in the streets and, with the court at her back, came the queen. Her eyes fell upon the crowned Joash. She understood.

The vampire, the adder, the leopard was trapped! And if ever the eyes of a beast glowed green with rage and impotent fury hers did.

"Treason! treason! treason!" she screamed, tearing her purple robe from neck to hem.

The crowd fell back. Before her guards

could draw, the captains of the hundreds were upon her. But her blood should not stain the holy ground. Cutting down her men, the king's men pressed through the gates, to the back of the royal house, at the place of the horses' entry, and—Joash was king.

XI

Hadassah

I'M a Jew, a captive, exiled, slave of a Jew! And I wear purple and advise a king? How? Simply the difference between a Jew and a Gentile. But the tale must start with Vashti, the queen.

She was the most beautiful woman in the realm, as well as queen. One feast day the king commanded her to appear unveiled before the gaping, half-drunk crowd in his banquet hall. She refused, and Ahasuerus, because he was king of the Medes and the Persians, took away her crown, even robbed her of the name of wife. Then he laid the kingdom under tribute to furnish another to take her place in the palace.

What follows was all in the way of business. A Jew—an exiled Jew—must live. Nebuchadnezzar had swept across Israel and scattered us like chaff. Once here, however, he let us alone—and a Jew asks nothing better than that. But I had more to do than exist merely. A fair

young girl, my cousin, was left me to father, to secure a fortune for in this strange, hostile land; and so, when the king's writ was published and his men began to gather the fairest virgins of the kingdom into Susa for the royal choice, it happened that this cousin, my adopted daughter, was among them.

No; it was not necessary to proclaim her "Jew." Looking at her, you would never know, for her beauty outshone all racial shadows. It belonged to no land. It was womanly, youthful, pure; you could ask no more, think of no less. Hegai, the eunuch, keeper of the women, didn't know. Even he could not look at her with so dead a thought as "Where does she come from?" or "Of what blood is she?" He fell in love with her immediately, and among that company of maidens—the flower of the land—he singled her out for favor.

I knew her blood, and charged her with silence. Through all that year of purification, before the king looked upon her, I walked every day in the court of the women's house, to know how she fared, to guard and cheer her. She was of royal stock and born to reign.

Her turn to go in unto the king was not the first. Many went in before her, robed like

the summer hills, as glorious as the sun. But I did not fear. One by one they all came back. It was hard to wake a heart that had put Vashti away. At last Hadassah's day came. She could wear a robe like a queen; but it was the woman, not the raiment, that the king must see; so, in the simple dress often worn about our home, she came into his presence.

I did not sleep that night. Pacing the Broad Place before the king's gate, I waited for the dawn. When it came, the captive maid, my daughter, was queen—from India to Ethiopia. The feast that followed in her honor was spread for all the kingdom, spread even across the borders of the kingdom. The very dungeon doors were thrown open that the prisoners might partake.

Meanwhile I sat unknown, and little better than a beggar, in the gates of the palace.

There was no hurry. Hadassah was queen; I could wait. No one suspected our relationship; no one knew that the Jew that idled at the gate was of any interest to the queen, and daily found a way to communicate with her.

And though we kept our secret perfectly, it was not long before this beggar's wheel took another turn. One day I overheard

words of a plot against the life of the king; and by a little listening, as I dozed in the sun, soon got the names of the plotters and their plan. I contrived to inform Hadassah immediately of this, and she went with it to the king, taking care to give all credit to a certain Mordecai, who sat in the king's gate. The plotters were promptly hanged, and the deed recorded in the royal archives, together with my name as the faithful servant who had saved the king's life.

But kings are forgetful. Ahasuerus hanged the doorkeepers swiftly enough, but failed to reward me. Still, the thing was there in the books to my account—good capital, I knew, and well invested. I kept my place and waited.

The sands of the court were constantly shifting, and sometimes rapidly too. The queen and her slave might change places between two suns; a favorite one day was often food for the ravens on the next. I reckoned my place in the gate as secure and as near the throne as any.

It was just at this time that the king lifted Haman, the Agagite, above all the nobles of the court, making him second only to himself in the realm. Haman deserved his place, if

pride and flattery count, for he knew the king, what words were sweet. Outside the palace he lacked only the royal staff and crown of being a second king. His pride was prodigious, his self-love inordinate, his greed of flattery a fever.

The people understood him and went out of their way to humble themselves. He strode along the streets of Susa like an east wind across a barley field—every back bending. Every back but mine. I scratch that grunting swine? Doubtless he never would have noticed me—for what was one beggar that *he* should see him when Susa was prostrate?—had not the servants prated that a miserable Jew mocked his purple and refused him honor.

After that he saw me, and the sight of a man's face had become so rare a thing since his exaltation that mine infuriated him. One flash of hate and he had passed. Then I fell to wondering what his revenge would be, and, when he came to take it, whether a certain Israelite, whose name was in the royal records, and a queen, would be able to match him in this game of hate.

The days went on. The stroke did not fall. It was certainly coming, and I thought I was

ready; but when at last it did fall, for once I cried out, cursing my name and blood.

Instead of upon me, worm that I was, his fury had descended upon my people. A Jew had insulted him—and the tribe to the youngest babe should die. The decree was published on the 13 Adar, and read, that, eleven months hence, every Jew in the realm should be massacred and his possessions seized.

It was a time of terror. We were so many cattle in the slaughter yard, with eleven months in which to fatten for this butcher. We closed our shops, turned our homes into tombs and sat in ashes. A decree of the Medes and Persians is irrevocable.

Yet there was time, and time was almost as good as a king's decree. I came in my sackcloth to the gate; for from here alone could I reach the queen. She was our hope. If she could get one promise from the king! And she could. There was a way. It lay through Haman.

My first work now was to get this news to the queen; so I not only came in sackcloth myself to the gate, but had my people fill the Broad Place before the palace till curiosity and comment should penetrate to the heart of the

harem. The servants of a king scent news as wolves scent sheep, and it was not long before Hathach appeared to know what it all meant. He had come directly from the harem, and I took pains to tell him all that Haman had done, mentioning the exact sum of money he had pledged the king from the spoil as the price of his revenge. I also handed him a copy of the decree on which I had written, in Hebrew, "Intercede."

An intercession was a hazard. She risked her life, I knew, for it was the law of the land that man or woman—even queen—entering the Inner Court unbidden, died, except the king held out in mercy the golden staff. As I expected, she sent back her dread at my command. Then I wrote again:

"Think not that thou shalt escape in the king's house more than all the Jews. If thou holdest thy peace at this time, deliverance shall rise from another place; but thou and thy father's house shall perish. Who knoweth whether thou art not come to the kingdom for such a time as this?"

"Go fast for me," was her reply, "neither eat nor drink for three days. I will go in unto the king against the law. If I perish, I perish."

I kept her fast. But I was not overanxious; for of all adventures, the least likely to fail is that of a beautiful woman with a king. I was not afraid, either, of the course she might adopt. I could trust her with Ahasuerus, with my life at stake.

The news was soon the common property of the city: Queen Hadassah had given a banquet to the king and king's favorite, Haman. And more: she had invited them to a second banquet on the morrow.

Such honor as this Haman had not dreamed. Besides the king an only guest at the queen's table! His head was higher, his elation plainer, as he left the palace that afternoon, than I had ever marked it before; and it was a sweet duty to stare at him as he passed near me, while the rest of the crowd was at his feet.

My impudence stung him as I knew it would. It was a drop of gall that bittered the whole sweet cup of laud. I thought he was going to thrust me through, but he checked himself and hurried across the Broad Place to his house.

That night I could not sleep, and, as my custom was, I strolled back toward the palace. As I neared the gate I heard workmen hammering in the direction of Haman's house, and

going over to the court, found them raising a gallows. It may have been the chill of the night air, but I suddenly felt cold and ill, and found my hand clutching at my throat, for it seemed as if a rope were tightening there.

Perhaps the king heard the knocking in of the pins as the heavy timbers of the scaffold went up; for he too was restless and unable to sleep. He was not free to watch the workmen as I was. The weightier matters of the kingdom troubled him, and as the night dragged along he had the scribe read the records of the archives to him. Had he left aught undone and thus offended the gods that he could not sleep?

The scribe had just read of the two chamberlains who had plotted against his life, and of Mordecai who betrayed them.

"Mordecai!" exclaimed the king, recalling that Hadassah had made special mention of one Mordecai as the king's preserver. "Has anything been done for this Mordecai? No? Who is in the court?" he added abruptly, "Mordecai shall be rewarded at once."

The dawn was breaking by this time. Not only had the king and I passed sleepless through the night, but Haman as well; and, so eager

was he to see me hanged from the gallows, that he was at this moment waiting in the court for an audience with the king.

"It is Haman in the court," replied the scribe to the king's question.

"Let him come in"—and Haman touched the golden scepter; but before he could open his mouth the king began:

"What shall I do to the man that I wish to honor?"

The vizier lost his head in his excitement; for who was that man but his own great self?

"Do? Let the king's royal robe be put upon him and his crown; let him sit upon the king's own war horse and be led through the streets by the most noble princes." The words leaped from his lips, he had imagined it all so many times.

"Good!" cried the king. "Make haste, Haman, and do all that thou hast said to Mordecai, who sitteth in the king's gate."

I cannot tell how Haman appeared with the robe and crown, how he dressed me with his own hands, helped me mount the war horse, and taking my bridle led me through the streets of Susa, amid the shouts of the populace. You have seen the simoon smite a green-

leafed olive; you have seen a mountain cedar struck by lightning. So was Haman. The cry of the people smothered, withered, blasted him. He dragged himself through the streets like a thing stricken, and when the course was finished, disappeared.

But the play was not over. This was only the second act. He must still appear this day at the queen's banquet; but he forgot his high honor, apparently, for when the hour came the chamberlain had to be dispatched to his house to remind him.

The queen from her couch at the banquet table could just see the top of the fifty-cubit gallows in Haman's yard which had gone up that night for me. The purpose of the ghastly thing was no secret in the court by this time. The queen knew; no one yet had dared approach to tell the king.

Haman came with a show of boldness. After all, why need he fear the young and innocent queen who had showed him such distinction? If he might not hang Mordecai to-day, he could compass it to-morrow. This humiliation was not intended by the king; it was but an incident on the way to glory.

The king knew that Hadassah had some

prayer to make, and the promise of yesterday —to the half of his kingdom—he repeated today. When the wine began to quicken in his blood, when the glow in the lovely face opposite him warmed, and the light in the deep dark eyes grew deeper and darker, the king leaned eagerly toward her and said:

"What is thy petition, Queen Hadassah? and it shall be granted thee, even to the half of my kingdom."

It was her moment. Lifting her face full into his, its live glow suddenly blanching ashy white, she answered steadily:

"If I have found favor in thy sight, O king, if it please the king, let my life be spared me and my people's; for I and my people are sold to be destroyed, to be slain, to perish! Had we been sold for slaves, I had held my peace, though the enemy could not have compensated the king's damage."

A purple flush swept over the king's face. He half rose from his couch. "Who? Where is he that dares?"

And Hadassah, still looking straight into the king's eyes, pointed toward the king's favorite, and answered, "The adversary, the enemy—this Haman!"

The king got to his feet white and silent and turned away toward the garden. The arras had not fallen behind him when Haman threw himself upon the couch of the queen, his tongue stiff with horror. There was little mercy in the glint of the black eyes and the drawn lips of this maid of a Jew.

The king was back before Haman had recovered himself far enough to rise from the couch, and in his blind wrath saw in this attitude only an attempt against the honor of his queen.

"What!" he hissed, "will he even force the queen before me in the house?"

"Yes," spoke a voice; and Hathach, the chamberlain, appeared from behind an arras. "Yes, and more! Behold yonder a gallows of fifty cubits high in Haman's court which he hath prepared for Mordecai, who saved the king's life!"

"Hang Haman, himself, thereon," was the swift reply—and the banquet was done.

That very day they hanged the vizier, where he intended to hang me. With him out of the way, the rest was easy. I took his place. The edict, of course, could not be revoked; but a counter edict was issued and spread through-

out the kingdom, that on the day appointed for the slaughter, the Jews should resist with arms. When that day came it was, as in the end it always will be, a victory for the Jew.

XII

The Gleaner

IN the far-off days of the Judges, when life was rude and simple, when every man did that which was right in his own eyes, and Israel had no need of a king, there fell a sore famine upon the land, a fever that burned in the blood of the vines and licked up the springs in the hills, till the vineyards shriveled and the barley fields of Beth-lehem-judah withered and blackened and turned to dust.

From the terraced orchards that rose above the walls of Beth-lehem, Elimelech could see eastward between two hills the blue of the Dead Sea, and on across the blue the low brown line of the mountains of Moab. Beyond those mountains, where the Arnon flowed, there were plains whose springs never failed and where famine's blight never fell. Thither, with his wife, Naomi, and his sons, Mahlon and Chilion, he would go to dwell.

So he came to the fertile land of the Moabites, broke the fields and sowed thrice; then

died, leaving Naomi a widow among the strangers.

The Moabites were heathen. Their god, Chemosh, was only another Molech, whose sacrifices were babes. But Beth-lehem was far away, and, besides, what was there for Naomi in Beth-lehem now? The Moabites were heathen, but they were kind; so Naomi stayed in Moab, and her two sons took them wives of the daughters of the land.

Then fell another evil day. The sons died, and Naomi, widowed and childless, was alone, with none to comfort her, but Orpah and Ruth, her daughters-in-law, who needed comfort like herself.

There was nothing to do now but to return to her own land, to Beth-lehem-judah, where all her kinsmen dwelt, especially since she had heard there was plenty there, that the Lord had visited the homeland with bread. With little preparation, she set forward upon her journey, Orpah and Ruth accompanying her from the village out upon the caravan road that led away northward to the east of Nebo, through Heshbon to the Jordan.

They wound up the stony road together as far as the brow of a hill, where Naomi paused.

Behind her lay the peaceful village of her daughters' people, where her husband and her sons slept; before her stretched a wide plain, traced by a single line of gray—her path—that wandered and wavered and disappeared among the distant hills of a wilderness out of which rose the lonely head of Nebo. It was time for Orpah and Ruth to turn back.

"We must part here, my children," said Naomi. Then drawing them to her, she kissed them, and through her tears commanded gently: "Return, each of you, to your mother's house. The Lord deal kindly with you as ye have dealt with the dead and with me." The three were weeping together.

But why should they turn back? They were widows here indeed; they were young; they had never held a babe warm to their breasts; and who but the next of kin to their husbands could take them to wife and raise up the name of their dead that it be not cut off from the earth? And, besides, they loved Naomi. They could not remain, and weeping aloud they said:

"Surely we will return with thee unto thy people."

Then Naomi forgot her own grief in theirs.

She looked far off across the weary plain. No; the way was too long, too full of pain; Bethlehem was too far away, too strange, too full of poverty—they must not go.

"Nay, my daughters, turn again. Why will ye go with me? Have I more sons to be your husbands? Turn again; go back to your homes, for it grieveth me much for your sakes that the hand of the Lord is against me."

Then Orpah kissed Naomi again, and turning went back. But Ruth clung only the closer.

Naomi looked into the girl's sad, dark eyes upturned toward her own. She loved her. There was something in the face of Ruth as gentle and lovely as the twilight.

"Thy sister is gone back to her people and to her god; return thou after her, my child," murmured the older woman.

Ruth rose from her knees. She took Naomi's hands in hers. Tenderly, but with love's strength, she said:

"Entreat me not to leave thee and to return from following after thee; for whither thou goest I will go, and where thou lodgest I will lodge; thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God; where thou diest I will die, and

there will I be buried. The Lord do so to me and more also, if aught but death part thee and me."

Naomi pressed her to her heart. They took a last look back together, back at the valley, at the solitary figure of Orpah near the foot of the hill, then set their faces toward the plain.

It was the beginning of the barley harvest, close to the end of March, when the winter rains were gone and the fierce heat of summer not yet come—the perfect days in Palestine. The gray ridges upon which Beth-lehem sat were fresh and warm to their tops, while the green of their slopes was broken everywhere with the gold of the heavy-headed barley and the darker yellow of the changing wheat.

The reapers were out, bending with their sickles among the grain, and singing as they cut. The birds sang with them: bulbuls from the tall, slim palms along the roads, and larks a-wing, scattering their wild notes down like showers from the upper air. The blue of the sky was clear and cool, and the air came heavy with spice and balm across the fragrant hills.

But the two women who toiled slowly up the road to Beth-lehem hardly heard the larks or the

reapers, scarcely saw the shining fields or the sky. They were footsore and sad; and the road grew steeper and stonier as they neared the walls of the town.

Time sped swiftly in those days—there were so few changes to mark its flight. The ten years of Naomi's absence had slipped by as a day. There were births and deaths; but the advent of a stranger was so rare a happening that Naomi's return was an event in Beth-lehem.

Those years had dragged slowly across Naomi, however. They had aged, broken, wearied her, so that the people looking upon her exclaimed, "Is this Naomi!"

"Nay, nay," she sighed in reply, "call me not Naomi, 'Winsome,' call me Mara, 'Bitter'; for the Almighty hath dealt very bitterly with me. I went away full, and the Lord hath brought me home again empty."

Among the near relatives of Naomi was Boaz, a man of great wealth and of great power in Beth-lehem. He would not see her lack bread while he had any to spare; and the broken, dispirited woman was willing that he should provide.

Not so Ruth. Life was young to her yet.

As far as possible she had left her sorrow behind in Moab. She could not sit idly down and become a pauper, nor busy herself with her woe to become its prey.

"Let me go into the harvest fields," she begged of Naomi, a few days after their arrival, "and glean behind the reapers. Is there not someone who will grant me leave to gather up the stray and fallen stalks?"

It pleased Naomi. "Go, my daughter," she said. "The Lord give thee grace in the reapers' eyes."

The dew was fresh upon the grass as Ruth passed through the gates of the town and stood looking out over the hillsides and valleys, out upon the yellow harvest fields. It was all strange to her; the only familiar sight was the road up which she had come so lately. She did not know one field from another, nor which way to turn. But she saw a broad bountiful world about her, she breathed deep of a morning-scented air, she heard bees humming in the wild dill and cumin flowers at her feet, she felt the stir of life and work everywhere, and she knew that the Almighty approved of gleaning, that he would direct her steps.

Yonder in a valley, from the edge of a field

where the reapers had just begun, she heard the call of a quail. She followed it, as if it had been a call to her. Already a wide swath was started through the grain, as the workers, a sickle's reach behind each other, moved in line down the field. Several maidens were at work after the men, binding and stacking the sheaves, amidst much bright talk and laughter.

Ruth approached the overseer. "I am Ruth," she said, "the daughter-in-law of Naomi, who came with her out of Moab. I pray you let me glean and gather after the reapers among the sheaves."

She need not have told him who she was; her beautiful, wistful face was enough. But the mention of Naomi gave the overseer more defensible ground upon which to grant her wish—for this was the field of Boaz, her kinsman.

The grain fell before the reapers and was caught up and sheaved by the bevy of happy maidens who followed close after the sickles. Ruth was a gleaner and an alien, and gathered by herself a long distance behind.

Sometime near noon Boaz himself came into the field. He was a man past middle age, with the gray just touching hair and beard—a mark

that added dignity rather than years to his strong, comely form and gracious bearing.

"The Lord be with you," he said, addressing the harvesters. They paused, and, saluting him, replied, "The Lord bless thee."

The yield was heavy. Boaz cast his eye over the thickly studding sheaves with a smile of pleasure. It was a satisfying sight. Then he noticed in the rear of his reapers and maidens a solitary girl, slender and graceful, gleaning across the field.

"Whose damsel is this?" he asked the overseer, pointing toward the gleaner, who, at that moment, turned and started toward him.

"It is Ruth, who came back with Naomi out of Moab. She prayed to be allowed to glean and hath been here since the morning."

Ruth's story was already known to the rich landlord. Boaz was a man of affairs, whose work was his love. He had never looked deep into a woman's eyes, much less had he ever happened before to see a woman come toward him singled out against a wide, golden field of grain. Ruth as she approached stood out alone in his sight. She had somehow stepped between him and his harvest and put it all behind her as a warm, glowing background to

the strange, half-hid beauty of her face and the grace of her lithe young form. She was alarmed at the warmth of his greeting.

"My daughter," he said, "go not to glean in another field, but abide here by my maidens. Let thine eyes be on the field that they reap and go thou after them. The young men shall not touch thee, and when thou art athirst go to the vessels and drink."

Ruth did not know who was addressing her, except that he was the owner of the field, a gentle and generous man. She did not mistrust him, yet she bent low and answered, not free from fear:

"Why have I found grace in thine eyes, that thou shouldst take knowledge of me, a stranger?"

"I am thy kinsman," the nobleman replied, "and I understand all that thou hast done to thy mother-in-law since the death of thy husband; and how thou hast left thy father and mother and the land of thy nativity and art come to a people whom thou knewest not heretofore. The Lord recompense thy work and a full reward be given thee of the Lord God of Israel, under whose wings thou hast come to rest."

"My Lord," she said, her deep, dark eyes looking full into his, "let me find favor in thy sight, for thou hast comforted me and spoken home to the heart of thy handmaiden, though I be not like one of thine own handmaidens."

She had risen and turning again to her task, when Boaz added, " 'Tis meal time. Come hither beneath the olive and eat with us, and dip thy morsel in the vinegar."

She sat down among the maidens next to Boaz, who pressed the harvest meal of parched corn upon her. Ruth ate, and, remembering Naomi, lonely at home, slipped part of her corn among the folds of her robe. She finished eating and went back to the gleaning before the others. When she was gone, Boaz said to the reapers:

"She will glean behind you; but let her gather even among the sheaves without reproach, and, now and then, let fall some handfuls on purpose for her where she will find them."

The shadows were creeping into the valleys, the dew was beginning to fall, and the quail was calling again when Ruth left the field with her day's gleanings, beaten out and tied up in

her large veil. The road was alive with tired, happy harvesters, company enough to the town. But Ruth walked apart.

That night, as they supped together, and Naomi partook of Ruth's parched corn, she asked:

"Where hast thou gleaned to-day, Ruth? Blessed be he who took knowledge of thee."

"The man's name is Boaz."

"Boaz? He is one of our next kin! Blessed be he of the Lord who hath not left off his kindness to the living and the dead."

"And he also said," continued Ruth, "that I should keep fast by his men till they have ended all the harvest."

"It is good, my daughter, that thou go out with his maidens, that they meet thee not in any other field."

So Ruth kept fast by the maidens of Boaz and gleaned through the barley harvest and until the wheat harvest was past. And while she gleaned, Naomi at home thought, and Boaz came often into the fields.

There was no sorrow in Israel in those days as keen as the sorrow of a childless widow. She was the contempt of women, the reproach of men, the cursed of God. For was it less than

God's curse that a man die and have no heir to preserve his name in the earth? So great was this calamity that Moses commanded, and the might of love enforced, that when a widow was left childless her husband's next brother (and if there were no brother, then the next nearest of kin) should marry her and raise up seed to take the dead man's name, that it be not erased from the gate of his town and perish from the earth. It was a sacred duty. Should the kinsman refuse, or neglect to do it, the widow was justified in forcing him or shaming him in the public place of the city.

Naomi remembered the law; Boaz had forgotten it. Yet he too had been thinking, as Naomi well knew by the continued increase in Ruth's daily gleanings. He possessed wealth; he had looked many times at the girl only to remember his years. There was even a bitterer thought than this: The law of Israel forbade marriage with the Gentile and heathen. He could not with honor approach the maiden.

And so the end of the harvest had come. It was now time for Naomi to act. She had waited, hoping that Boaz would speak. He had not. That he would, if he could, she felt sure. She would help him. He needed a hint.

"My daughter," said Naomi a few days after the harvest, "shall I seek rest for thee that it may be well for thee? Boaz is our kinsman, and he has shown favor unto thee; but he has not taken his brother's place to raise up a name to his brother and to remove thy reproach. Pray, daughter, listen to a plan I have.

"To-night he winnoweth barley in the threshing floor. Make thyself ready, therefore, and get thee down to the floor, but do not show thyself. And it shall be, that when he lieth down to sleep, thou shalt mark the place, and thou shalt approach and lay thee down at his feet. Then will he understand, for he knoweth that thou art a virtuous woman."

It was a gay scene at the threshing floor—a harvest-home; but when the evening fell every one was glad to lie down to sleep.

Ruth waited. It was a hard, a delicate, dangerous adventure, and as the stars shone out and the silence came 'tis little wonder if she wished those stars looked down upon her in distant Moab. The darkness deepened and the stillness at the floor told that sleep had come to all.

Ruth drew her veil more closely about her and stole softly forward till she stood where

Boaz was sleeping. Then still more softly she laid herself at his feet, as Naomi had said, in conformity with a Jewish widow's right.

It was near midnight when the man turned and woke, startled by her touch, at his feet.

"Who is it?" he demanded in a harsh whisper.

"Ruth," answered a sweet, thrilling voice, "Ruth, thine handmaid. Spread therefore thy skirt over me, for thou art a near kinsman."

He understood. She was right and he was wrong. Why had he not long ago thought of it and fulfilled the law of Moses and the law of his own heart, and saved her this shame! Was it not enough that she had been forced to glean? His heart smote him.

"Blessed be thou of the Lord, my daughter, for thou hast shown more kindness in the latter end than at the beginning. Fear not, I will do all that thou requirest.

"It is true that I am thy near kinsman, yet there is a kinsman nearer than I. Tarry where thou art this night, and in the morning, if he will perform unto thee the part of a kinsman, well; but if he will not, then will I, as the Lord liveth. Lie down until the morning."

Ruth lay down at his feet; but in the morn-

ing, before one could know another, she rose to go.

"Let it not be known," Boaz said, "thy coming to the floor," and taking her veil he poured into it all that she could carry of the grain; and went part of the way with her back to the city.

When Naomi heard all that had happened she said to Ruth,

"Sit still, my daughter, until thou know how the matter will fall; for the man will not rest until he has finished the thing this day."

Naomi was right. Boaz started for Bethlehem with the dawn. He was anxious to fulfill the law, but he was infinitely more anxious to possess this beautiful girl who seemed only the lovelier for her sadness, her poverty, and her exile.

But there were two serious difficulties in his way: Suppose the other kinsman had seen her? Surely he would take her. Yet, if he did refuse to redeem her! How even, then, could the second difficulty, the law forbidding marriage with the heathen, be evaded?

Boaz pondered these things as he waited in the gate for the other kinsman. Soon the man appeared.

"Ho," cried Boaz to him, "turn aside and sit down here."

Then calling in ten elders of the city as witnesses, Boaz began the keenest piece of bargaining of his life. A wife, the most beautiful in all Palestine, was at stake.

"Naomi, that is returned from Moab," he said to the other kinsman, "selleth the parcel of land which was our brother Elimelech's; and I thought to disclose it unto thee. Buy it, therefore, before the elders. If thou wilt not redeem it, then tell me, for there is none to do it beside thee, except me."

The reply came promptly and decisively, "I will redeem it."

This was just what Boaz was prepared for, and as quick as thought he added, "But the day thou buyest the field of the hand of Naomi, thou must buy it also of Ruth, the Moabitess, the wife of the dead, to raise up the name of the dead upon his inheritance."

That was a staggerer. To buy a field was one thing; but to buy a wife along with it was quite another thing.

"I cannot do it," he answered, firmly, "lest I mar my own inheritance. Take thou my right, for I cannot redeem it."

Boaz was schooled in the business of buying and selling; but had the elders looked sharply, they might have seen something like nervousness in the haste with which he took the shoe, drawn off the foot of his kinsman in sign of attestation to the sale, and turned upon them.

"Ye are witnesses this day that I have bought all that was Elimelech's and Chilion's and Mahlon's of the hand of Naomi. Moreover, Ruth, the Moabitess, the wife of Mahlon, have I purchased to be my wife, to raise up the name of the dead upon his inheritance that it be not cut off from among his brethren and from the gate of his place. Ye are witnesses."

And they answered with one voice: "We are witnesses. And the Lord make the woman like Rachael and Leah. And do thou worthily in Ephratah and be famous in Beth-lehem."

It was done. Ruth was his wife. The elders might remember the rigid law touching union with the heathen; but it was too late now. The rapidity, the apparent self-sacrifice and generosity of Boaz had left them neither time to think nor disposition to criticize. They had sanctioned the contract, and Boaz was already on his way to the house of Naomi to seek her blessing on his marriage with Ruth.

When another harvest came, there was a little son in the home of Boaz. Naomi was there and held the child in her bosom and became its nurse. Then the neighbors came in and they gave it a name, calling his name Obed.

Now Obed became the father of Jesse, and Jesse was the father of David, king of Israel.

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